

WRITING IN THE WORKS

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
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Chapter 1

The Writer's Process

Writing Rituals

The hardest part of writing is sitting down and doing it. Each of us has concocted a hundred ways to delay that moment. One writer has to clean the room in which she writes; another has to have all his research done, notes organized, and virtual pencils sharpened while yet another works out of chaos, needing a cluttered desk in order to feel productive. One writer cannot finish a sentence unless every word is spelled correctly and is grammatically perfect; another types madly, almost randomly, discovering what she means as she writes.

It probably won't surprise you that all these ways of generating writing are equally valid and equally good. There are as many ways of jump-starting the writing process as there are writers. One writer who has spent her professional life going to the office to write got six months off to research and write a series of articles. She tells the story of how she woke up on Day One, feeling enormous relief that she didn't have to put on work clothes, gulp down breakfast, and drive the 20 miles to her office through rush hour. Sara made her morning coffee, and, still in her sweats and T-shirt, sat down in front of her computer. Nothing. She got up, paced, sat down again. Blank screen. Panic set in. She decided to take the day off, not rush herself.

Day Two mirrored Day One. And so did Day Three. By Day Four she dreaded getting up, and instead lay in bed trying to figure out the problem. It came to her that she had interrupted her lifelong habit of thinking and planning her day's writing as she showered, dressed, and drove. So she did just that. She showered, dressed, and drove for twenty minutes around her neighborhood, got out of her car, reentered her house, took off her coat, sat down at the computer, and began writing.

Driving randomly around your neighborhood or campus may not be the best way for you to start your first writing assignment. Because it worked for one person doesn't mean it will work for you. People who write every day as a profession—or in their professions—inhabit the worlds of business, entertainment, academia, government, and social services. They write reports, film and television scripts, scholarly articles, speeches, advertising copy, and position papers. Each writer has a ritual, a way of getting started, whether it is as simple as having that second cup of coffee or as elaborate as Sara's. Discovering what works for you—and resisting the well-intentioned advice of others who may have a different style—may be one of the most important first steps to becoming a comfortable and confident writer.

Here's how one student describes his writing rituals after he gets an assignment:

...I react with a few instinctive ideas (oh, this, that, that, the other thing) and then forget about it for a few days. Probably in the back of my mind, some little neuron-slash-hamster is running inside the wheel of idea generation, churning out plethoric subconscious thoughts. Eventually one of those thoughts will be something neanderthalic—I'm not too smart—like "Paper. Thursday. Due," and off like a maniac I run to my computer. Although I claim to write nonstop till it's done, I

really do take my fair share of breaks. “Oh, this comma is a good excuse to eat a cookie,” or “Oh, that letter Z represents the time to check my email,” or “Ah, this prose is so poetic I’ll play guitar for half an hour.” So things take a lot longer than expected, but this keeps my little hamster from getting too tired.

-Nathan Welton-

Practice

- ♦ Describe your own writing rituals. What do you do to get yourself primed for writing?
- ♦ Observe the writing ritual of someone you know—a friend, family member, or roommate, for example. Watch as they get ready to write a paper. Take notes. Then interview them. See if their perception of their preparations match yours.

Process Theory

Once upon a time—and maybe still in some schools—writing was taught as though everyone went through identical locksteps. First you wrote an outline. Then you wrote the first draft. Then you wrote the second draft. Then you proofread, edited, and handed in your final copy. The process looked like this:

PREWRITE (OUTLINE)

COMPOSE

REVISE

The assumptions in this method were that (1) writers knew what they wanted to say before they wrote, that writing was simply a visible translation of their thoughts and that (2) the writing process was logical, linear, and clean. Both these assumptions can be easily challenged by anyone who has written either a high-school essay or a best-selling novel.

Discovering Meaning

“... We do not write in order to be understood; we write in order to understand.”

-C. Day Lewis-

Rather than being a direct translation of a well-formed set of ideas, writing is often a process of discovering meaning. You know this is true if you’ve ever sat down to write an opinion essay on gun control or election reform without a clue as to your opinion one way or the other. Many times (not always) as you write, you figure out what you think about the subject. You may even discover to your delight that you feel strongly, even passionately, about a topic you hadn’t really considered before. Arguments spring to mind; you remember a study from

psychology class or a story you read over the break that illustrates perfectly the point you're making. Sometimes the very act of writing triggers thoughts or accesses information stored in your long-term memory.

This process of "discovery writing" means that you should sometimes give yourself permission to write freely, without constraints, without your internal editor sitting on your shoulder frowning at your word choice or *tsking* at your abominable spelling. While you are brainstorming, coming up with as many ideas as you can on a topic, you should try not to interrupt yourself to edit or correct your writing. You will have time later to go back, revise, and spell-check, but you may never be able to retrieve the flow of your ideas once you interrupt it.

A Recursive Process

The second assumption, that the writing process is logical and linear, may in fact be true for some people. But for many, writing is a messy business.

What is it that we really do when we write? How do we move through the actual process of writing: getting thoughts down on paper?

If you watch a videotape of a writer at work (which writing researchers have actually done) you'll see much more seemingly random activity—and more emotion—than you might expect. Most writers, once they begin to write, jump from task to task. They may start writing, then back up and make a list. They may order their notes, then write a conclusion before they write the paper itself. They may spend an hour on a single paragraph or they may get the whole paper out in that hour. They also stretch, yell, grimace, pace the room, and laugh out loud.

This research tells us that the writing process is recursive, that is, it moves both forward and backward. This process looks more like a circle than the earlier linear model:

PREWRITING

REVISING

COMPOSING

In order to move forward, you sometimes have back up and reconsider a key idea, do a little more research or think for a while about the nuance of the language. You can brainstorm at any part of the process, not just before you write, and while you are brainstorming, for example, you are often also revising by editing out the workable ideas from the impractical ones ("*...dumb idea, won't work... maybe I could go in this direction... that won't support this argument, but I might be able to use it later.*"). During revision, ideas can surface that redirect the whole paper or generate whole new sections.

Practice

- ◆ Describe your own writing process. Do you start with an outline or a list? Do you write the introduction first or the conclusion? When do you do your research—before you start, throughout the process and/or after you've finished a first draft and know where the holes are? Does this process vary, depending on the assignment?
- ◆ Would you describe your own process—from the time a paper is assigned until it is completed—as linear or recursive? Support your answer by giving an example from the last time you wrote a paper.

Brainstorming

"I write to find out what I'm thinking about."

-Edward Albee-

You have your writing assignment. You've done your writing rituals. You have some sense of your own writing process. It's time to begin brainstorming, begin generating ideas.

Most writers spend some time after getting an assignment thinking through the topic, figuring out what they know and what they still have to research. Some writers find the initial brainstorming to be fun; others think it's just hard work. How you view brainstorming may depend on the number of strategies you know.

One suggestion for all writing assignments: Leave yourself time—time to think, talk and read about your subject. When you first get an assignment, read it carefully. Even if you don't have time to write immediately, you can be turning it over in your mind—and brainstorming both consciously and unconsciously.

Knowing what the options are, though, and trying them on for size, can often transform brainstorming from hard work to fun.

Keeping a Writer's Notebook

Most writers keep some sort of notebook. It doesn't matter if it is a binder, a black-and-white composition notebook, a reporter's spiral note pad, or napkins held together by paper clips. What is important is that you have a place to record random thoughts, overheard dialogue, and ideas that come unbidden in the midst of humdrum activity.

A writer's notebook is a place where your ideas can incubate. Once you write an idea down on a piece of paper, you'll remember it—and you can return to it, alter it, expand on it, or cross it out. The act of writing an idea down inscribes it not only on the paper but also in your mind.

When you have a writing assignment, the assignment itself may retreat to the back of your mind as you go about your daily activities. However, as you jog or shower or even as you talk with friends or attend a class, you may find yourself thinking about the topic or coming up with an approach or an idea for the assignment. Take out your notebook and jot down your thoughts.

Another idea is to keep a notebook by your bed. You have probably had the experience of waking up in the morning with a solution to a knotty writing problem that you had gone to bed trying to untangle—or perhaps not even consciously thinking about. By giving the matter a rest

while you do, you have gotten a new perspective. If your notebook is at your bedside, you can write a few notes while the ideas are fresh.

Less practical but maybe more important, keeping a notebook will make you feel like a writer. It's one of the tools of the trade.

Practice

◆ Buy a notebook of any size or shape. Carry it around with you all day for two days. Put it next to your bed at night. Write in it every time you have an idea for a writing assignment or for any writing you may want to do on your own. Here are some other suggestions for what to write in your notebook:

- Snippets of your dreams
- Insightful comments made by friends or professors
- Clever ads or tag lines
- Quotations from your reading
- Overheard conversations
- Unusual events from the news or from your own observations
- Original writing: descriptions of people, places, events that interest you

◆ Write about anything that might work well in a piece of writing, but don't use your notebook as just a log of your activities. Think of it as a collecting place for images, quotations, ideas, bits of dialogue. Fill at least two pages each day.

◆ Write a few paragraphs evaluating the experience of keeping a notebook for these two days.

Freewriting

Freewriting is the practice of writing without limitations and without clear destination, using free association. It is a way you can use writing to discover meaning. It is also a powerful way to prime the writing pump, both physically and psychologically. Many writers ignore the physical aspect of writing, but it is a real and important part of the process, as any writer suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome will attest.

Athletes talk about "muscle memory." After repeating an activity numerous times, your muscles remember how to do that activity: how to ride the bike or whack the ball. Even after long periods of inactivity, your muscles can remember a previous action and help you recall its flow.

So it is with writing. The physical act of forming letters with a pen or typing them on a keyboard prompts your brain to recall the activity of writing—letters and words coming together. The physical act of writing can help ideas flow freely. It can also help you retrieve memories of other words you've written, ideas you've formed, things you have read, or experiences you've had. One idea leads to another.

It's worth a try. The rules are simple: write freely for a set period of time. Start with ten minutes, which is not so short that you can't follow a train of thought and not so long that it gets tedious.

Set down onto paper or your computer screen everything you can think of about your topic. Don't stop writing. Don't edit or censor your writing in any way. If you get stuck, write whatever comes to mind, even if it's "I can't think of what to write," or "This is the dumbest thing I've ever done."

After ten minutes, stop and read what you've written. Or, if you're on a tear, keep going. You may discover that everything you've written is garbage or that there may be hidden gems. Underline or circle any ideas or good lines you think you can use, if not now, maybe later. Copy ideas for future writing into your writer's notebook.

Practice

- ◆ Try your hand at freewriting, as it is described above. If you don't have a topic in mind or an assignment to work with, write about anything you know a great deal about: basketball, Colonial America, global warming, cooking, chaos theory, or civil liberties.
- ◆ Read your freewrite. Circle any interesting idea that might be the kernel for any piece of writing, from an academic essay to a poem. Put a box around any phrases or sentences that might be keepers.
- ◆ What was your response to the freewriting? Is it a technique you might find useful? Explain why or why not.

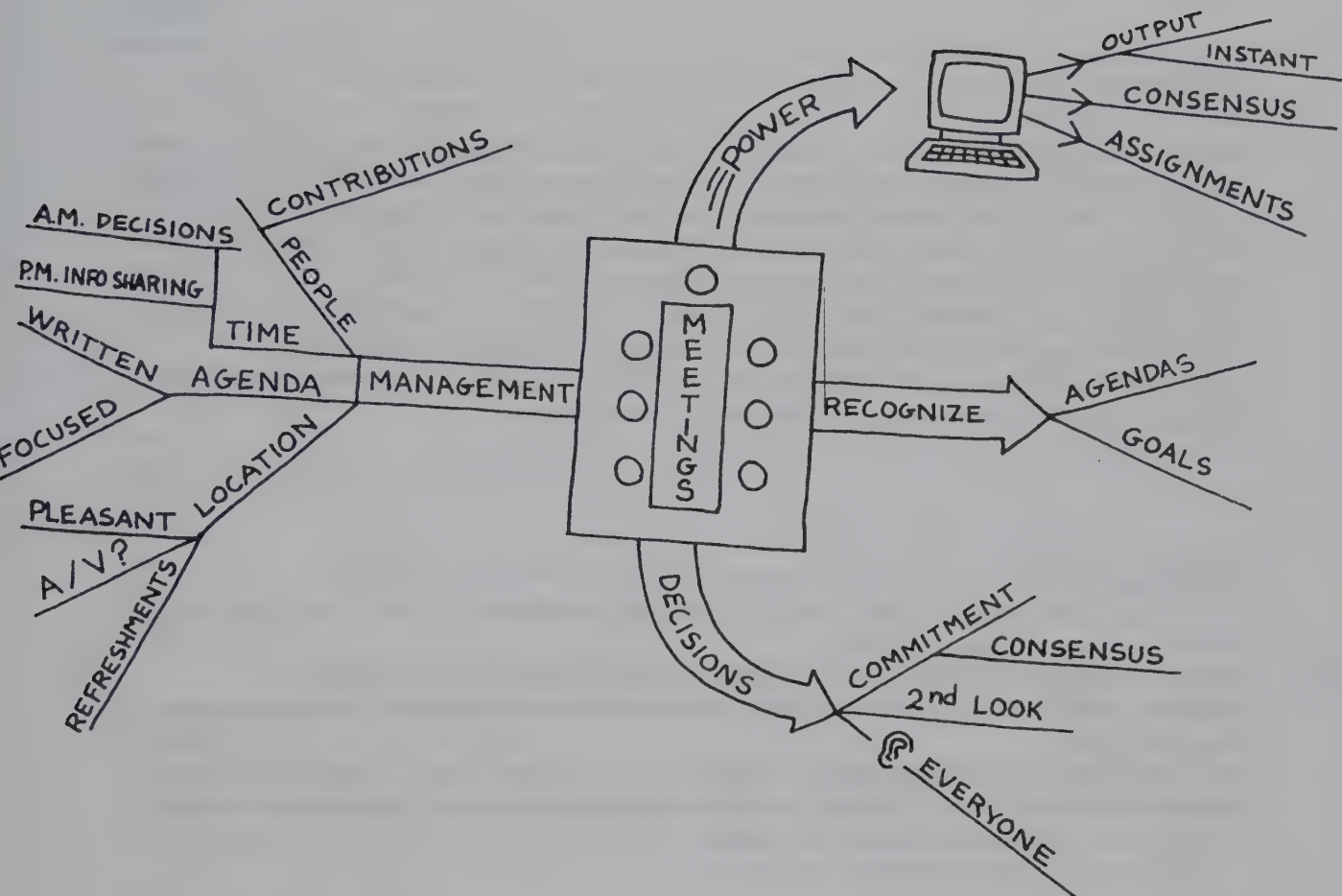
Clustering

Clustering, a.k.a. word webbing or branching, has proved to be a powerful brainstorming technique for some writers. Like freewriting, it allows for free association of ideas, and in its freewheeling style almost forces the writer to turn off the internal editor who lurks in so many of our minds.

Some writers believe that clustering allows them to bypass conventional, linear thinking and to have a direct line to memory and creativity. Writers who are more visual thinkers—screenwriters, advertising copywriters and artists—for example find that clustering opens up thinking in a way that outlining cannot. Business managers and educational administrators also use clustering for problem solving, group process, and creating flow charts. Because relationships between ideas are created as the ideas themselves are produced, clustering allows you to generate a much more complex interrelationship of ideas than a top-to-bottom list or an outline allows.

Here's how clustering works. You begin by writing a word or a phrase in the middle of a page. This word or phrase becomes the physical and thematic center of your brainstorm. You circle the word and then, radiating out from this center, write words or phrases in quick succession, circling each word/phrase and connecting it with a line to the previous and successive one. When you have run that string as far as it will go, you return to the center and begin again in another direction. When you have finished generating the ideas, look at your key words and draw lines to connect ideas that belong together.

Here's a sample cluster from a chapter on "managing meetings" from a book on creativity and problem solving in business management.



Clustering has also been touted as a sure way to break through writer's block and as an effective way to take notes while at the same time cementing the ideas in your mind. It's a relatively painless process. As you read a chapter in a textbook, put the key idea in a circle in the middle of a page. Then, as you read, take notes radiating out from this key concept. Draw lines to show the relationship of the satellite ideas. When you've finished the chapter, you've mapped the key ideas of a chapter in an easily accessible one-page study guide. And you've cemented the ideas in your mind.

Practice

- ◆ Try your hand at brainstorming a writing assignment through clustering. If you have a writing assignment in mind, use that assignment as your starting point. If you don't have an assignment, write the word "college" at the center of the page. Give yourself ten minutes to do the clustering. When you are done, draw lines among those words that belong together. Write the first paragraph of a paper that might come from this brainstorm.
- ◆ Try using clustering as a note-taking technique. Since you've already read this far into Chapter 1, start again at page one and create a study guide for the chapter up to this point.
- ◆ Write a paragraph (in your writer's notebook) about your response to this technique. Was it useful for you? Will you use it again? Explain why or why not.

Collaborative Activity:

- Write the word "writing" in the middle of a blank page and circle it. Give yourself ten minutes to create a cluster of associative words.
- When you are finished, draw lines among those words or ideas that belong together.
- Take a minute to regard your ideas; then number the five most significant or interesting ideas, 1 being the highest.
- Have one member of your group take out a fresh piece of paper. Write "writing" in the center, and create a collective cluster, starting with each member's first ideas and progressing to the fifth.
- Discuss the similarities and differences between the individual and the collective clusters.
- Discuss your response to doing this activity.

Listing, Outlining

Making lists of your ideas is perhaps a more conventional brainstorming activity than freewriting or clustering. Listing is a good, quick way to get your ideas on paper. As you develop your ideas, you can rearrange them in a logical order or an agreeable pattern.

Outlines can also be useful in brainstorming. Like a list, an outline gets your ideas on paper for safekeeping and consideration, but outlines go into more depth than a list. You don't have to create a formal outline—with Roman numerals, capital letters, Arabic numbers, lower-case letters—but you should write down your main ideas as you generate them and then fill in the supporting points.

Under each main idea, jot down the information you have—or will need to find—that will support, illustrate, expand on, or discuss that idea. If you indent a little for each supporting

idea, the indentations will help you see the difference between equal, main points and subordinate, less important points—or between your general ideas and the specific support. (A simple outline would look like the editorial example that follows on page 12.)

Outlines are particularly useful to help organize long papers with complicated structures. Outlining also makes good sense—and is a powerful organizational tool—*after* you write your first draft, as a springboard into revision. Wherever you choose to use outlining in your writing process, make sure you think of the resulting structure as flexible. The outline should open up your thinking, not preserve it in stone.

Reading

Reading and researching are essential prewriting activities. Read what others have said about your topic and read other models of the form you're writing. It will help you to write an essay or a film review if you have read a number of them. There's no need to invent the form. Read what others have written in order to get the voice, language, and structure in your mind.

Reading is important for another reason. To be a good writer, you have to be a reader. The patterns and rhythms of written language are different from spoken language. In order to master the craft of writing, you should have its cadences ingrained in your head. And the way to do it is to read everything you can get your hands on: great literature and pulp fiction, historical letters and emails, plays and film scripts, op ed columns and advertising copy. Don Murray, writer and writing teacher, says, "You can be a reader without writing, but you can't be a writer without reading."

Composing

"The thing about writing is to stay in the chair."

-Wallace Stegner-

The point of all the prewriting and brainstorming activities—the journal keeping, freewriting, clustering, listing, outlining, reading—is to make the composing part easier, to make it easier for you to stay in that chair.

No matter what type of paper you are writing, four basic activities lay at the heart of composition: collecting, selecting, ordering, and writing. Here's a brief overview of those activities.

Collecting information

It doesn't matter if you are writing a researched article, a proposal to bring to town meeting, a video script, or a personal essay. You have to gather information for your paper.

Each writing assignment requires different kinds of research and a repertoire of researching skills. In all assignments, however, you need to gather information and take careful notes about the ideas, quotations, and sources you consult. You will benefit if you continue reading and researching as you write and revise. The more you learn about a topic, the more interesting it becomes to you and your reader.

Selecting a focus

By the time you have finished your initial reading, researching, and taking of notes, you should have the answers to questions you have posed to yourself and a good idea of what you want to say.

This main point provides the focus of your paper. It doesn't matter if you call your point a thesis in an essay, a theme in a story, a claim in an editorial, a premise in an argument, a concept in a proposal, or a nut graf in a feature article. It is the single main point you are making in your paper. Throughout the composing process, you can still be flexible, still refine or redefine your point as you write, but in the end, the main point is the firm foundation on which your paper is built.

One good focusing technique for all assignments is to summarize your main point in a single sentence. Ask yourself, "What's the point of this story/review/essay/proposal/report?" Then tape that sentence near where you write—on the wall by your desk or to the top of your computer.

Writing down your main point will help you to clarify it, and keeping it in front of you as you write will help immeasurably to keep you on track. If you veer off and like the new path, revise your sentence. You may not discover your true point until you've finished your piece. That's okay. Revise your sentence, and then use the new sentence to focus the entire revision process.

Your writing will be in focus if you know your point and communicate it clearly. On the other hand, nothing will make your reader toss your piece aside quicker than a pointless ramble.

Ordering

This probably won't shock you: In the real world, there's no such thing as the five-paragraph essay. The five-paragraph essay is one of those instructional devices that are useful to teach certain concepts. Its purpose is not to model real-world writing ("Jones, I want a five-paragraph essay on the state of the project and I want it pronto!") but to teach the concept of order, a key concept in all writing.

Every piece of writing should have an organizing principle, a reason why *this* particular paragraph follows *that* one. Paragraphs should be linked together overtly through transitional words (*first of all, then, next, on the other hand, later*) or more subtly through the repetition of key words or key ideas.

Organization sets up certain expectations for your reader. Your job as a writer, after all, is to keep your reader interested and moving forward. Readers should be drawn into your writing first by your main point and then moved along as if they were on a path laid out for them, a path that leads inevitably to your conclusions.

So consider the function of your piece of writing. Here are some questions you can ask yourself.

- What is the **purpose** of this writing? Is it going to *tell* a story or *report* on an event, *review* a book or *analyze* a poem, *argue* for building bicycle lanes in city streets or for world peace?
- What **techniques**—a story, examples, a list of facts—will best support my points?
- Who is my targeted **reader** for this piece of writing? Think beyond the classroom. If you're writing a news report, for example, think of newspaper readers sitting on public transportation on their way to work.
- Where might I **publish** it? Some answers might be: a newspaper, a literary journal, an online magazine, an annual report, a radio show.

In the coming chapters you will see how considerations of purpose, technique, audience, and publication will lead you to specific organizational patterns—for example, chronology for narrative, spatial for description, building block and inverted pyramid for reporting information or analysis. You can also invent your own structure, and you can also use more than one organizing structure in a single piece of writing.

Writing

It is time to actually write that first draft. As you write, don't edit yourself, don't think of your worst writing critic peering over your shoulder, don't worry about grammar, spelling, or style *yet*. Just get your ideas on paper, keeping your focus in mind and following, as much as possible, the structure you've set for the piece. Remember that this is a *first* draft. You'll have plenty of time later to fix it up.

But, above all, stay in that chair.

If you have ever felt insecure about your first-draft efforts, this excerpt from Anne Lamott's instructional book on writing, *bird by bird*, should reassure you.

S h i t t y F i r s t D r a f t s

Now, practically even better news than that of short assignments is the idea of shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not *one* of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her. (Although when I mentioned this to my priest friend Tom, he said you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.)

Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it. Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled. They do not type a few stiff warm-up sentences and then find themselves bounding along like huskies across the snow. One writer I know tells me that he sits down every morning and says to himself nicely, "It's not like you don't have a choice, because you do—you can either type or kill yourself." We all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid. The right words and sentences just do not come pouring out like ticker tape most of the time. Now, Muriel Spark is said to have felt that she was taking dictation from God every morning—sitting there, one supposes, plugged into a Dictaphone, typing away, humming. But this is a very hostile and aggressive position. One might hope for bad things to rain down on a person like this.

For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts.

The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, "Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?," you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper, because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you're supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go—but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages.

Revising

"When I see a paragraph shrinking under my eyes like a strip of bacon on a skillet, I know I'm on the right track.

-Peter DeVries-

Once you have that first draft written; once you've collected, selected, ordered, and developed your ideas; once you've fiddled with the introduction, the body, and the conclusion—it probably feels as though it's time for a break. Take it.

Then, sometime in the not-too-distant future, come back to the draft and look at it with fresh eyes. Plan enough time between finishing your first draft and meeting your deadline to put the paper away, at least overnight. Ideally, leave a day or two for revising.

Revision is the heart of the writing process. One of the differences between skilled and unskilled writers, successful and unsuccessful ones, is often how they go about the act of revision.

If you want to be successful, avoid the "thesaurus" method of revising, which consists of substituting fancy words for plain ones. Changing words, spell-checking, and cleaning up grammatical or mechanical errors are all important end-stage writing activities, but they aren't the essence of revising. Revising consists of truly rethinking your draft, seeing it again freshly. You have to be willing to change your focus, to reorder your thinking, and to lop off whole sections and develop others, if necessary.

Five activities that are key to a successful revision are refocusing, reordering, adding, cutting, and editing.

Refocusing

Remember that statement you wrote and taped to your computer as a way to keep your focus? Check it as you finish your first draft, and see if it still holds. If not, a good way to start your revision is to write that one-sentence statement. Answer the question, "What is the main point of this paper?"

Let's say you're writing an editorial for the campus newspaper, and your focusing sentence is "The college administration should allocate more funds to the student escort service." Perhaps as you began your paper, you started talking in general terms about money being allocated unfairly to student activities, or you listed a few worthy groups that need more funding, the escort service among them. Perhaps, as is often the case, you didn't figure out your point until you had written the whole editorial, and there at the end of the piece sat your main point—that the escort service needs funding.

Once you've discovered your claim, you can go back and make that point in a clear, bold opening sentence, such as, "The escort service is so underfunded that it compromises the safety of every student on campus."

This is the sentence that you should paste on your computer and that should help you determine how to go about the rest of the revision process. Of course, it is always possible that you found your focus way before this moment. In that case, you are ahead of the game. Jump to square two.

Reordering

You have your focus, and now you have to make sure that you've presented your ideas in the best possible order. Outlining can be extremely useful at this point in the process. Look over

your paper paragraph by paragraph. Outline what you have actually written. The editorial about funding for an escort service might look like this:

- I. Claim: Escort service is underfunded and compromises student safety.
- II. The budget is too small.
 1. \$800 for advertising and staffing
 2. no money to purchase a van or pay for gas
 3. quote from head of escort service about lack of \$\$
- III. Other student activities have much larger budgets.
 1. sports
 2. outdoor club
 3. debate society
- IV. Call to action: We have to get more funding for the escort service.
 1. petition administration
 2. elect new student government

Although this outline looks good, a closer inspection shows that the second point of the claim, that the escort service compromises student safety, is totally missing. You can either strike it from the claim or, probably a better choice, add a section after III and before IV called “Student safety is compromised.” Here’s where you can tell the story of the student who was frightened, and then get a quote from the chief of campus police about student safety.

You might also consider that it would be better to switch the order of II, the current budget of the escort service, with III, the current budgets of other activities. It might be more effective to set the stage by citing the enormous sports budget, for example, before you show the miniscule one for the escort service.

And, finally, when you look at your call to action, you might decide that what you can do immediately, petition the administration, would be a better way to muster the troops than the student government elections that take place in two months. If that is the case, it would be good to switch the order of the final two points in order to leave your reader with your strongest point and something specific to do.

Adding

With a clear focus and a final-stage outline, you will know what you have to add in order to complete your piece. In the case of this sample editorial, the outline allowed you to see the hole in the argument, the lack of support for the idea that student safety is being compromised.

Another way to figure out what needs to be added is to take on the persona of a pesky reader who needs everything explained clearly, much as you did as you initially developed your ideas. Read through the piece from this person’s perspective and ask yourself a lot of questions: How do you know that? Can you give an example? What does that mean? Can you explain that in more detail? What is your evidence? Don’t let yourself get away with sloppy thinking,, unclarified ideas, or unsupported generalizations.

Even better would be to find a real reader, someone who isn’t as close to the piece as you are. See if a classmate or a friend would give your piece a reader’s response, telling you where he or she gets lost or bogged down or needs more information. If your college has a writing center, this is a good time to go.

Cutting

Cutting, as the name implies, can be a painful part of revising. Once you get those words down on paper, it is hard to imagine removing them. But it can also be liberating to cut the unnecessary and irrelevant material from your writing. The writer's paradox is that you often need to cut in order to strengthen. Like a sculptor who begins chiseling away at a magnificent piece of marble, you often have to discard some beautiful material to discover the shapes within.

Cutting occurs on two levels. The **macro level** cutting happens when you've figured out your focus. It doesn't matter whether you discover your focus during the initial brainstorming, during composing, or at the end of writing the first draft. Once you know your focus, examine every paragraph. Each paragraph should lead to the main point or lead away from it through support, illustration, or discussion. Even if you have written a brilliant passage, for example, if it isn't on the topic or makes a reasonable and interesting digression from the topic, you have to get rid of it.

The **micro level** cutting is the reward at the end of the journey. This is where you get to clean up the clutter that covers the hidden gems, or at least that covers the good, clean writing. Cutting clutter rewards you with more elegant language, with cleaner and clearer sentences. As with any activity, the more you do it, the easier it becomes. Soon you will see that when you write phrases such as "in this modern world of today" or "at this point in time," you can more effectively write "today" or "now."

Presidential speechwriter and author Peggy Noonan put it this way: "Remember the waterfront shack with the sign FRESH FISH SOLD HERE. Of course it's fresh; we're on the ocean. Of course it's for sale; we're not giving it away. Of course it's here; otherwise the sign would be someplace else. The final sign: FISH."

The following exercise should give you a sense of how to get to "FISH."

Practice

Here are a few examples of cluttered prose. Imbedded in each sentence is a clear idea that can be expressed in far fewer words. Rewrite each sentence, cutting the clutter.

- The management of this company is no longer able to allow grade 2 employees to occupy their current positions—or any subordinate, lateral, or higher positions—within the structure of this organization.
- It is incumbent on all of the representatives of the media to remember that the essential task of journalists' prose is to communicate with sparkling linguistic clarity.
- As a fiscally privileged citizen of this municipality, you should be cognizant of the multiple and numerous reasons to philanthropically donate to the charitable endeavors of proximate non-profit organizations.
- It is essential and critically important to teach basic fundamentals to children in their young childhood years.
- Mistakes of hugely ignorant proportions were made inadvertently by those who have been afforded the boon of capacious intellectual acumen.

Editing

Most of the time, editing is the final part of revision. Go through the paper twice, the first time looking for places where you can enhance the style, then correcting errors in grammar and mechanics.

Enhancing style doesn't mean adding linguistic doodads to your writing. Style is not an add-on to a piece of writing but an integral part of it. Style can be described as the sum total of all the choices you've made in word choice, sentence length, and paragraph structure. It is the result of all your writerly decisions.

Cutting clutter, as just described, is one way to achieve a clean and elegant writing style. Other guidelines are to write with concrete nouns and muscular verbs, to limit your use of adjectives and adverbs, to avoid unintentional repetition, and to develop an engaging voice.

Editing for correctness, often called proofreading, is not just about correcting grammatical, punctuation, and mechanical errors, however. Correctness also includes checking for accuracy. Have you spelled names correctly? Are the dates right? Have you quoted print material precisely? Have you quoted sources exactly?

With proofreading, as with revision in general, fresh eyes see more. Put the piece away for a while and return at a later time when you are less close to the material. Another useful technique is to read each paragraph (or even the whole paper) from the bottom to the top. That way you isolate your sentences from their context, giving you a better shot at finding sentence structure problems, for example.

An old proofreading parlor trick demonstrates the difficulty of finding errors in context. The directions are to find any errors in the following text:

When I went to the deli,
I asked for bagels and
and cream cheese. "We're out,"
said the clerk. I left
empty-handed.

If you haven't found the error in one reading, try reading the passage from bottom to top and see if the error is easier to find. Often, the eye skips over the repeated "and," correcting it automatically.

However you go about the final edit, the result should be a clean and error-free manuscript. Readers really do care, and so should you.

Practice

Write for five minutes about your own revision process. How do you go about the task of revising your first draft?

Stories

Anne Lamott is a memoirist, a fiction writer, and a writing teacher. In her introduction to her best-selling book of advice about writing, *bird by bird*, she writes about her initiation into writing.

I grew up around a father and a mother who read every chance they got, who took us to the library every Thursday night to load up on books for the coming week. Most nights after dinner my father stretched out on the couch to read, while my mother sat with her book in the easy chair and the three of us kids each retired to our own private reading stations. Our house was very quiet after dinner—unless, that is, some of my father's writer friends were over. My father was a writer, as were most of the men with whom he hung out. They were not the quietest people on earth, but they were mostly very masculine and kind. Usually in the afternoons, when that day's work was done, they hung out at the no name bar in Sausalito, but sometimes they came to our house for drinks and ended up staying for supper. I loved them, but every so often one of them would pass out at the dinner table. I was an anxious child to begin with, and I found this unnerving.

Every morning, no matter how late he had been up, my father rose at 5:30, went to his study, wrote for a couple of hours, made us all breakfast, read the paper with my mother, and then went back to work for the rest of the morning. Many years passed before I realized that he did this by choice, for a living, and that he was not unemployed or mentally ill. I wanted him to have a regular job where he put on a necktie and went off somewhere with the other fathers and sat in a little office and smoked. But the idea of spending entire days in someone else's office doing someone else's work did not suit my father's soul. I think it would have killed him. He did end up dying rather early, in his mid-fifties, but at least he had lived on his own terms.

So I grew up around this man who sat at his desk in the study all day and wrote books and articles about the places and people he had seen and known. He read a lot of poetry. Sometimes he traveled. He could go anyplace he wanted with a sense of purpose. One of the gifts of being a writer is that

it gives you an excuse to do things, to go places and explore. Another is that writing motivates you to look closely at life, at life as it lurches by and tramps around.

Writing taught my father to pay attention; my father in turn taught other people to pay attention and then to write down their thoughts and observations. His students were the prisoners at San Quentin who took part in the creative-writing program. But he taught me, too, mostly by example. He taught the prisoners and me to put a little bit down on paper every day, and to read all the great books and plays we could get our hands on. He taught us to read poetry. He taught us to be bold and original and to let ourselves make mistakes, and that Thurber was right when he said, "You might as well fall flat on your face as lean over too far backwards." But while he helped the prisoners and me to discover that we had a lot of feelings and observations and memories and dreams and (God knows) opinions we wanted to share, we all ended up just the tiniest bit resentful when we found the one fly in the ointment: that at some point we had to actually sit down and write.

I believe writing was easier for me than for the prisoners because I was still a child. But I always found it hard. I started writing when I was seven or eight. I was very shy and strange-looking, loved reading above everything else, weighed about forty pounds at the time, and was so tense that I walked around with my shoulders up to my ears, like Richard Nixon. I saw a home movie once of a birthday party I went to in the first grade, with all these cute little boys and girls playing together like puppies, and all of a sudden I scuttled across the screen like Prufrock's crab. I was very clearly the one who was going to grow up to be a serial killer, or keep dozens and dozens of cats. Instead, I got funny. I got funny because boys, older boys I didn't even know, would ride by on their bicycles and taunt me about my weird looks. Each time felt like a drive-by shooting. I think this is why I walked like Nixon: I think I was trying to plug my ears with my shoulders, but they wouldn't quite reach. So first I got funny and then I started to write, although I did not always write funny things.

The first poem I wrote that got any attention was about John Glenn. The first stanza went, "Colonel John Glenn went up to heaven / in his spaceship, *Friendship Seven*." There were many, many verses. It was like one of the old English ballads my mother taught us to sing while she played the piano. Each song had thirty or forty verses, which would leave my male relatives flattened to our couches and armchairs as if by centrifugal force, staring unblinking up at the ceiling.

The teacher read the John Glenn poem to my second-grade class. It was a great moment; the other children looked at me as though I had learned to drive. It turned out that the teacher had submitted the poem to a California state schools competition, and it had won some sort of award. It appeared in a mimeographed collection. I understood immediately the thrill of seeing oneself in print. It provides some sort of primal verification: you are in print; therefore you exist. Who knows what this urge is all about, to appear somewhere outside yourself, instead of feeling stuck inside your muddled but stroboscopic mind, peering out like a little undersea animal—a spiny blenny, for instance—from inside your tiny cave? Seeing yourself in print is such an amazing concept: you can get so much attention without having to actually show up somewhere. While others who have something to say or who want to be effectual, like musicians or baseball players or politicians, have to get out there in front of people, writers, who tend to be shy, get to stay home and still be public. There are many obvious advantages to this. You don't have to dress up, for instance, and you can't hear them boo you right away.

Sometimes I got to sit on the floor of my father's study and write my poems while he sat at his desk writing his books. Every couple of years, another book of his was published. Books were revered in our house, and great writers admired above everyone else. Special books got displayed prominently: on the coffee table, on the radio, on the back of the john. I grew up reading the blurbs on dust jackets and the reviews of my father's books in the papers. All of this made me start wanting to be a writer when I grew up—to be artistic, a free spirit, and yet also to be the rare working-class person in charge of her own life.

Still, I worried that there was never quite enough money at our house. I worried that my father was going to turn into a bum like some of his writer friends. I remember when I was ten years old, my father published a piece in a magazine that mentioned his having spent an afternoon on a porch at Stinson Beach with a bunch of other writers and that they had all been drinking lots of red wine and smoking marijuana. No one smoked marijuana in those days except jazz musicians, and they were all also heroin addicts. Nice white middle-class fathers were not supposed to be smoking marijuana; they were supposed to be sailing or playing tennis. My friends' fathers, who were teachers and doctors and fire fighters and lawyers, did not smoke marijuana. Most of them didn't even drink, and they certainly did not have colleagues who came over and passed out at the table over the tuna casserole. Reading my father's article, I could only imagine that the world was breaking down, that the next time I burst into my dad's study to show him my report card he'd be crouched under the desk, with one of my mother's nylon stockings knotted around his upper arm, looking up at me like a cornered wolf. I felt that this was going to be a problem; I was sure that we would be ostracized in our community.

All I ever wanted was to belong, to wear that hat of belonging.

In seventh and eighth grades I still weighed about forty pounds. I was twelve years old and had been getting teased about my strange looks for most of my life. This is a difficult country to look too different in—the United States of Advertising, as Paul Krassner puts it—and if you are too skinny or too tall or dark or weird or short or frizzy or homely or poor or nearsighted, you get crucified. I did.

But I was funny. So the popular kids let me hang out with them, go to their parties, and watch them neck with each other. This, as you might imagine, did not help my self-esteem a great deal. I thought I was a total loser. But one day I took a notebook and a pen when I went to Bolinas Beach with my father (who was not, as far as I could tell, shooting drugs yet). With the writer's equivalent of canvas and brush, I wrote a description of what I saw: "I walked to the lip of the water and let the foamy tongue of the rushing liquid lick my toes.

A sand crab burrowed a hole a few inches from my foot and then disappeared into the damp sand. . . ." I will spare you the rest. It goes on for quite a while. My father convinced me to show it to a teacher, and it ended up being included in a real textbook. This deeply impressed my teachers and parents and a few kids, even some of the popular kids, who invited me to more parties so I could watch them all make out even more frequently.

One of the popular girls came home with me after school one day, to spend the night. We found my parents rejoicing over the arrival of my dad's new novel, the first copy off the press. We were all so thrilled and proud, and this girl seemed to think I had the coolest possible father: a writer. (Her father sold cars.) We went out to dinner, where we all toasted one another. Things in the family just couldn't have been better, and here was a friend to witness it.

Then that night, before we went to sleep, I picked up the new novel and began to read the first page to my friend. We were lying side by side in sleeping bags on my floor. The first page turned out to be about a man and a woman in bed together, having sex. The man was playing with the woman's nipple. I began to giggle with mounting hysteria. Oh, this is great, I thought, beaming jocularly at my friend. I covered my mouth with one hand, like a blushing Charlie Chaplin, and pantomimed that I was about to toss that silly book over my shoulder. This is wonderful, I thought, throwing back my head to laugh jovially; my father writes pornography.

✓ In the dark, I glowed like a light bulb with shame. You could have read by me. I never mentioned the book to my father, although over the next couple of years, I went through it late at night, looking for more sexy parts, of which there were a number. It was very confusing. It made me feel very scared and sad.

Then a strange thing happened. My father wrote an article for a magazine, called "A Lousy Place to Raise Kids," and it was about Marin County and specifically the community where we lived, which is as beautiful a place as one can imagine. Yet the people on our peninsula were second only to the Native Americans in the slums of Oakland in the rate of alcoholism, and the drug abuse among teenagers was, as my father wrote,

soul chilling, and there was rampant divorce and mental breakdown and wayward sexual behavior. My father wrote disparagingly about the men in the community, their values and materialistic frenzy, and about their wives, "these estimable women, the wives of doctors, architects, and lawyers, in tennis dresses and cotton frocks, tanned and well preserved, wandering the aisles of our supermarkets with glints of madness in their eyes." No one in our town came off looking great. "This is the great tragedy of California," he wrote in the last paragraph, "for a life oriented to leisure is in the end a life oriented to death—the greatest leisure of all."

There was just one problem: I was an avid tennis player. The tennis ladies were my friends. I practiced every afternoon at the same tennis club as they; I sat with them on the weekends and waited for the men (who had priority) to be done so we could get on the courts. And now my father had made them look like decadent zombies.

I thought we were ruined. But my older brother came home from school that week with a photocopy of my father's article that his teachers in both social studies and English had passed out to their classes; John was a hero to his classmates. There was an enormous response in the community: in the next few months I was snubbed by a number of men and women at the tennis club, but at the same time, people stopped my father on the street when we were walking together, and took his hand in both of theirs, as if he had done them some personal favor. Later that summer I came to know how they felt, when I read *Catcher in the Rye* for the first time and knew what it was like to have someone speak for me, to close a book with a sense of both triumph and relief, one lonely isolated social animal finally making contact.

I started writing a lot in high school: journals, impassioned antiwar pieces, parodies of the writers I loved. And I began to notice something important. The other kids always wanted me to tell them stories of what had happened, even—or especially—when they had been there. Parties that got away from us, blowups in the classroom or on the school yard, scenes involving their parents that we had witnessed—I could make the story happen. I could make it vivid and funny, and

even exaggerate some of it so that the event became almost mythical, and the people involved seemed larger, and there was a sense of larger significance, of meaning.

✓ I'm sure my father was the person on whom his friends relied to tell their stories, in school and college. I know for sure that he was later, in the town where he was raising his children. He could take major events or small episodes from daily life and shade or exaggerate things in such a way as to capture their shape and substance, capture what life felt like in the society in which he and his friends lived and worked and bred. People looked to him to put into words what was going on.

I suspect that he was a child who thought differently than his peers, who may have had serious conversations with grown-ups, who as a young person, like me, accepted being alone quite a lot. I think that this sort of person often becomes either a writer or a career criminal. Throughout my childhood I believed that what I thought about was different from what other kids thought about. It was not necessarily more profound, but there was a struggle going on inside me to find some sort of creative or spiritual or aesthetic way of seeing the world and organizing it in my head. I read more than other kids; I luxuriated in books. Books were my refuge. I sat in corners with my little finger hooked over my bottom lip, reading, in a trance, lost in the places and times to which books took me. And there was a moment during my junior year in high school when I began to believe that I could do what other writers were doing. I came to believe that I might be able to put a pencil in my hand and make something magical happen.

Then I wrote some terrible, terrible stories.

Stephen King's fame as a popular writer rests solidly on the publication of his many novels, stories, and screenplays. He is probably best known for books (and movies) such as *Misery*, *The Shining*, *It*, and *The Stand*. His writing memoir *On Writing* combines personal narrative with advice to writers. In the following excerpt, King tells how he made a sickly childhood year bearable by reading and eventually writing.

I was stunned by Mary Karr's memoir, *The Liars' Club*. Not just by its ferocity, its beauty, and by her delightful grasp of the vernacular, but by its *totality*—she is a woman who remembers *everything* about her early years.

I'm not that way. I lived an odd, herky-jerky childhood, raised by a single parent who moved around a lot in my earliest years and who—I am not completely sure of this—may have farmed my brother and me out to one of her sisters for awhile because she was economically or emotionally unable to cope with us for a time. Perhaps she was only chasing our father, who piled up all sorts of bills and then did a runout when I was two and my brother David was four. If so, she never succeeded in finding him. My mom, Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King, was one of America's early liberated women, but not by choice.

Mary Karr presents her childhood in an almost unbroken panorama. Mine is a fogged-out landscape from which occasional memories appear like isolated trees . . . the kind that look as if they might like to grab and eat you.

What follows are some of those memories, plus assorted snapshots from the somewhat more coherent days of my adolescence and young manhood. This is not an autobiography. It is, rather, a kind of *curriculum vitae*—my attempt to show how one writer was formed. Not how one writer was *made*; I don't believe writers *can* be made, either by circumstances or by self-will (although I did believe those things once). The equipment comes with the original package. Yet it is by no means unusual equipment; I believe large numbers of people have at least some talent as writers and storytellers, and that those talents can be strengthened and sharpened. If I didn't believe that, writing a book like this would be a waste of time.

This is how it was for me, that's all—a disjointed growth process in which ambition, desire, luck, and a little talent all played a part. Don't bother trying to read between the lines, and don't look for a through-line. There are *no* lines—only snapshots, most out of focus.

My earliest memory is of imagining I was someone else—imagining that I was, in fact, the Ringling Brothers Circus Strongboy. This was at my Aunt Ethelyn and Uncle Oren's house in Durham, Maine. My aunt remembers this quite clearly, and says I was two and a half or maybe three years old.

I had found a cement cinderblock in a corner of the garage and had managed to pick it up. I carried it slowly across the garage's smooth cement floor, except in my mind I was dressed in an animal skin singlet (probably a leopard skin) and carrying the cinderblock across the center ring. The vast crowd was silent. A brilliant blue-white spotlight marked my remarkable progress. Their wondering faces told the story: never had they seen such an incredibly strong kid. "And he's only *two!*" someone muttered in disbelief.

Unknown to me, wasps had constructed a small nest in the lower half of the cinderblock. One of them, perhaps pissed off at being relocated, flew out and stung me on the ear. The pain was brilliant, like a poisonous inspiration. It was the worst pain I had ever suffered in my short life, but it only held the top spot for a few seconds. When I dropped the cinderblock on one bare foot, mashing all five toes, I forgot all about the wasp. I can't remember if I was taken to the doctor, and neither can my Aunt Ethelyn (Uncle Oren, to whom the Evil Cinderblock surely belonged, is almost twenty years dead), but she remembers the sting, the mashed toes, and my reaction. "How you howled, Stephen!" she said. "You were certainly in fine voice that day."

A year or so later, my mother, my brother, and I were in West De Pere, Wisconsin. I don't know why. Another of my mother's sisters, Cal (a WAAC beauty queen during World War II), lived in Wisconsin with her convivial beer-drinking husband, and maybe Mom had moved to be near them. If so, I don't remember seeing much of the Weimers. *Any* of them, actually. My mother was working, but I can't remember what her job was, either. I want to say it was a bakery she worked in, but I think that came later, when we moved to Connecticut to live near her sister Lois and *her* husband (no beer for Fred, and not much in the way of conviviality, either;

he was a crewcut daddy who was proud of driving his convertible with the top *up*, God knows why).

There was a stream of babysitters during our Wisconsin period. I don't know if they left because David and I were a handful, or because they found better-paying jobs, or because my mother insisted on higher standards than they were willing to rise to; all I know is that there were a lot of them. The only one I remember with any clarity is Eula, or maybe she was Beulah. She was a teenager, she was as big as a house, and she laughed a lot. Eula-Beulah had a wonderful sense of humor, even at four I could recognize that, but it was a *dangerous* sense of humor—there seemed to be a potential thunderclap hidden inside each hand-patting, butt-rocking, head-tossing outburst of glee. When I see those hidden-camera sequences where real-life babysitters and nannies just all of a sudden wind up and clout the kids, it's my days with Eula-Beulah I always think of.

Was she as hard on my brother David as she was on me? I don't know. He's not in any of these pictures. Besides, he would have been less at risk from Hurricane Eula-Beulah's dangerous winds; at six, he would have been in the first grade and off the gunnery range for most of the day.

Eula-Beulah would be on the phone, laughing with someone, and beckon me over. She would hug me, tickle me, get me laughing, and then, still laughing, go upside my head hard enough to knock me down. Then she would tickle me with her bare feet until we were both laughing again.

Eula-Beulah was prone to farts—the kind that are both loud and smelly. Sometimes when she was so afflicted, she would throw me on the couch, drop her wool-skirted butt on my face, and let loose. “Pow!” she'd cry in high glee. It was like being buried in marshgas fireworks. I remember the dark, the sense that I was suffocating, and I remember laughing. Because, while what was happening was sort of horrible, it was also sort of funny. In many ways, Eula-Beulah prepared me for literary criticism. After having a two-hundred-pound babysitter fart on your face and yell *Pow!*, *The Village Voice* holds few terrors.

I don't know what happened to the other sitters, but Eula-Beulah was fired. It was because of the eggs. One morning Eula-Beulah fried me an egg for breakfast. I ate it and asked for another one. Eula-Beulah fried me a second egg, then

asked if I wanted another one. She had a look in her eye that said, "You don't *dare* eat another one, Stevie." So I asked for another one. And another one. And so on. I stopped after seven, I think—seven is the number that sticks in my mind, and quite clearly. Maybe we ran out of eggs. Maybe I cried off. Or maybe Eula-Beulah got scared. I don't know, but probably it was good that the game ended at seven. Seven eggs is quite a few for a four-year-old.

I felt all right for awhile, and then I yarked all over the floor. Eula-Beulah laughed, then went upside my head, then shoved me into the closet and locked the door. Pow. If she'd locked me in the bathroom, she might have saved her job, but she didn't. As for me, I didn't really mind being in the closet. It was dark, but it smelled of my mother's Coty perfume, and there was a comforting line of light under the door.

I crawled to the back of the closet, Mom's coats and dresses brushing along my back. I began to belch—long loud belches that burned like fire. I don't remember being sick to my stomach but I must have been, because when I opened my mouth to let out another burning belch, I yarked again instead. All over my mother's shoes. That was the end for Eula-Beulah. When my mother came home from work that day, the babysitter was fast asleep on the couch and little Stevie was locked in the closet, fast asleep with half-digested fried eggs drying in his hair.

— 3 —

Our stay in West De Pere was neither long nor successful. We were evicted from our third-floor apartment when a neighbor spotted my six-year-old brother crawling around on the roof and called the police. I don't know where my mother was when this happened. I don't know where the babysitter of the week was, either. I only know that I was in the bathroom, standing with my bare feet on the heater, watching to see if my brother would fall off the roof or make it back into the bathroom okay. He made it back. He is now fifty-five and living in New Hampshire.

When I was five or six, I asked my mother if she had ever seen anyone die. Yes, she said, she had seen one person die and had heard another one. I asked how you could hear a person die and she told me that it was a girl who had drowned off Prout's Neck in the 1920s. She said the girl swam out past the rip, couldn't get back in, and began screaming for help. Several men tried to reach her, but that day's rip had developed a vicious undertow, and they were all forced back. In the end they could only stand around, tourists and townies, the teenager who became my mother among them, waiting for a rescue boat that never came and listening to that girl scream until her strength gave out and she went under. Her body washed up in New Hampshire, my mother said. I asked how old the girl was. Mom said she was fourteen, then read me a comic book and packed me off to bed. On some other day she told me about the one she saw—a sailor who jumped off the roof of the Graymore Hotel in Portland, Maine, and landed in the street.

"He splattered," my mother said in her most matter-of-fact tone. She paused, then added, "The stuff that came out of him was green. I have never forgotten it."

That makes two of us, Mom.

Most of the nine months I should have spent in the first grade I spent in bed. My problems started with the measles—a perfectly ordinary case—and then got steadily worse. I had bout after bout of what I mistakenly thought was called "stripe throat"; I lay in bed drinking cold water and imagining my throat in alternating stripes of red and white (this was probably not so far wrong).

At some point my ears became involved, and one day my mother called a taxi (she did not drive) and took me to a doctor too important to make house calls—an ear specialist. (For some reason I got the idea that this sort of doctor was called an otologist.) I didn't care whether he specialized in ears or assholes. I had a fever of a hundred and four degrees, and each time I swallowed, pain lit up the sides of my face like a jukebox.

The doctor looked in my ears, spending most of his time (I think) on the left one. Then he laid me down on his examining table. "Lift up a minute, Stevie," his nurse said, and put a large absorbent cloth—it might have been a diaper—under my head, so that my cheek rested on it when I lay back down. I should have guessed that something was rotten in Denmark. Who knows, maybe I did.

There was a sharp smell of alcohol. A clank as the ear doctor opened his sterilizer. I saw the needle in his hand—it looked as long as the ruler in my school pencil-box—and tensed. The ear doctor smiled reassuringly and spoke the lie for which doctors should be immediately jailed (time of incarceration to be doubled when the lie is told to a child): "Relax, Stevie, this won't hurt." I believed him.

He slid the needle into my ear and punctured my eardrum with it. The pain was beyond anything I have ever felt since—the only thing close was the first month of recovery after being struck by a van in the summer of 1999. That pain was longer in duration but not so intense. The puncturing of my eardrum was pain beyond the world. I screamed. There was a sound inside my head—a loud kissing sound. Hot fluid ran out of my ear—it was as if I had started to cry out of the wrong hole. God knows I was crying enough out of the right ones by then. I raised my streaming face and looked unbelieving at the ear doctor and the ear doctor's nurse. Then I looked at the cloth the nurse had spread over the top third of the exam table. It had a big wet patch on it. There were fine tendrils of yellow pus on it as well.

"There," the ear doctor said, patting my shoulder. "You were very brave, Stevie, and it's all over."

The next week my mother called another taxi, we went back to the ear doctor's, and I found myself once more lying on my side with the absorbent square of cloth under my head. The ear doctor once again produced the smell of alcohol—a smell I still associate, as I suppose many people do, with pain and sickness and terror—and with it, the long needle. He once more assured me that it wouldn't hurt, and I once more believed him. Not completely, but enough to be quiet while the needle slid into my ear.

It *did* hurt. Almost as much as the first time, in fact. The smooching sound in my head was louder, too; this time it was giants kissing ("suckin' face and rotatin' tongues," as we used to say). "There," the ear doctor's nurse said when it was

over and I lay there crying in a puddle of watery pus. "It only hurts a little, and you don't want to be deaf, do you? Besides, it's all over."

I believed that for about five days, and then another taxi came. We went back to the ear doctor's. I remember the cab driver telling my mother that he was going to pull over and let us out if she couldn't shut that kid up.

Once again it was me on the exam table with the diaper under my head and my mom out in the waiting room with a magazine she was probably incapable of reading (or so I like to imagine). Once again the pungent smell of alcohol and the doctor turning to me with a needle that looked as long as my school ruler. Once more the smile, the approach, the assurance that *this* time it wouldn't hurt.

Since the repeated eardrum-lancings when I was six, one of my life's firmest principles has been this: Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool me three times, shame on both of us. The third time on the ear doctor's table I struggled and screamed and thrashed and fought. Each time the needle came near the side of my face, I knocked it away. Finally the nurse called my mother in from the waiting room, and the two of them managed to hold me long enough for the doctor to get his needle in. I screamed so long and so loud that I can still hear it. In fact, I think that in some deep valley of my head that last scream is still echoing.

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In a dull cold month not too long after that—it would have been January or February of 1954, if I've got the sequence right—the taxi came again. This time the specialist wasn't the ear doctor but a throat doctor. Once again my mother sat in the waiting room, once again I sat on the examining table with a nurse hovering nearby, and once again there was that sharp smell of alcohol, an aroma that still has the power to double my heartbeat in the space of five seconds.

All that appeared this time, however, was some sort of throat swab. It stung, and it tasted awful, but after the ear doctor's long needle it was a walk in the park. The throat doctor donned an interesting gadget that went around his head on a strap. It had a mirror in the middle, and a bright fierce light that shone out of it like a third eye. He looked

down my gullet for a long time, urging me to open wider until my jaws creaked, but he did not put needles into me and so I loved him. After awhile he allowed me to close my mouth and summoned my mother.

"The problem is his tonsils," the doctor said. "They look like a cat clawed them. They'll have to come out."

At some point after that, I remember being wheeled under bright lights. A man in a white mask bent over me. He was standing at the head of the table I was lying on (1953 and 1954 were my years for lying on tables), and to me he looked upside down.

"Stephen," he said. "Can you hear me?"

I said I could.

"I want you to breathe deep," he said. "When you wake up, you can have all the ice cream you want."

He lowered a gadget over my face. In the eye of my memory, it looks like an outboard motor. I took a deep breath, and everything went black. When I woke up I was indeed allowed all the ice cream I wanted, which was a fine joke on me because I didn't want any. My throat felt swollen and fat. But it was better than the old needle-in-the-ear trick. Oh yes. *Anything* would have been better than the old needle-in-the-ear trick. Take my tonsils if you have to, put a steel birdcage on my leg if you must, but God save me from the otologist.

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That year my brother David jumped ahead to the fourth grade and I was pulled out of school entirely. I had missed too much of the first grade, my mother and the school agreed; I could start it fresh in the fall of the year, if my health was good.

Most of that year I spent either in bed or housebound. I read my way through approximately six tons of comic books, progressed to Tom Swift and Dave Dawson (a heroic World War II pilot whose various planes were always "prop-clawing for altitude"), then moved on to Jack London's bloodcurdling animal tales. At some point I began to write my own stories. Imitation preceded creation; I would copy *Combat Casey* comics word for word in my Blue Horse tablet, sometimes adding my own descriptions where they seemed appropriate. "They were

camped in a big dratty farmhouse room," I might write; it was another year or two before I discovered that *drat* and *draft* were different words. During that same period I remember believing that *details* were *dentals* and that a bitch was an extremely tall woman. A son of a bitch was apt to be a basketball player. When you're six, most of your Bingo balls are still floating around in the draw-tank.

Eventually I showed one of these copycat hybrids to my mother, and she was charmed—I remember her slightly amazed smile, as if she was unable to believe a kid of hers could be so smart—practically a damned prodigy, for God's sake. I had never seen that look on her face before—not on my account, anyway—and I absolutely loved it.

She asked me if I had made the story up myself, and I was forced to admit that I had copied most of it out of a funny-book. She seemed disappointed, and that drained away much of my pleasure. At last she handed back my tablet. "Write one of your own, Stevie," she said. "Those *Combat Casey* funny-books are just junk—he's always knocking someone's teeth out. I bet you could do better. Write one of your own."

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I remember an immense feeling of *possibility* at the idea, as if I had been ushered into a vast building filled with closed doors and had been given leave to open any I liked. There were more doors than one person could ever open in a lifetime, I thought (and still think).

I eventually wrote a story about four magic animals who rode around in an old car, helping out little kids. Their leader was a large white bunny named Mr. Rabbit Trick. He got to drive the car. The story was four pages long, laboriously printed in pencil. No one in it, so far as I can remember, jumped from the roof of the Graymore Hotel. When I finished, I gave it to my mother, who sat down in the living room, put her pocketbook on the floor beside her, and read it all at once. I could tell she liked it—she laughed in all the right places—but I couldn't tell if that was because she liked me and wanted me to feel good or because it really *was* good.

"You didn't copy this one?" she asked when she had finished. I said no, I hadn't. She said it was good enough to be in

a book. Nothing anyone has said to me since has made me feel any happier. I wrote four more stories about Mr. Rabbit Trick and his friends. She gave me a quarter apiece for them and sent them around to her four sisters, who pitied her a little, I think. *They* were all still married, after all; their men had stuck. It was true that Uncle Fred didn't have much sense of humor and was stubborn about keeping the top of his convertible up, it was also true that Uncle Oren drank quite a bit and had dark theories about how the Jews were running the world, but they were *there*. Ruth, on the other hand, had been left holding the baby when Don ran out. She wanted them to see that he was a talented baby, at least.

Four stories. A quarter apiece. That was the first buck I made in this business.

Talking Points

1. Both Lamott and King (and most of your writing teachers) talk about reading as central to a writer's life. Is this true in your experience?
2. As they recount in these childhood memories, King's home was not a literary one while Lamott's childhood was steeped in books. How much influence do you think parents have in their children's development as readers and writers?
3. Lamott writes, "...writing motivates you to look closely at life, at life as it lurches by and tramps around." Do you think that statement is universally true?
4. King asserts that writers cannot be "made," only "formed." "The equipment comes with the original package," he writes. Do you agree?

Writing

Here are some ideas for writing:

1. Find a published writer whom you can interview. Focus your interview on how the writer started writing. On a college campus, you should have many options of professors who have published, but you can also go to a bookstore reading or a poetry slam. Interview the writer about his or her writing process. Write up your findings in a 2-3 page article.
2. Reread the excerpts from King and Lamott. Write a short piece about a time you were rewarded for your writing or wrote a piece that gave you pleasure.
3. Write a short piece about your childhood initiation into writing. Describe your family's attitude toward books and your own.
4. Find a short passage that you think is badly written. Write a page or two explaining why you think it's unsuccessful. Be persuasive.

5. Find a short passage that you think is well written. Write a page or two explaining why you think it's successful. Be persuasive.
6. Interview three professional people who are neither teachers nor in a traditional writing profession like journalism. (They could be in business, medicine, social services, government, science, or entertainment, for example.) Find out how they use writing in their professional lives and what their writing processes are. Make some conclusions from the information you gather. Write up your findings in a 2-3 page report.
7. Interview three students who are not in your writing class and who have different majors than you. Find out their attitudes about writing, how much writing they do in and out of school, and what their writing processes are. Make some conclusions from the information you gather. Write up your findings in a 2-3 page report.

Chapter 2

News Reports

“Journalism is literature in a hurry.” --Matthew Arnold--

Definition

On your way to work in the morning traffic near the I-95 split slows to a standstill. It is not until you're over the hill at Millville that you can see cars lined up for five miles or more—stopped dead. Far ahead, sprinkled among the sea of bumper-to-bumper cars, are flashing red lights, ambulances. As you open your car window, you can hear the faint repetitions of sirens amidst car horns honking. From your vantage on the hill, you can count two dozen, maybe thirty, ambulances locked in the crowd. And, as you look further ahead, you can see the black smoke and fire coming from the All-Chem plant. You know they make fertilizer there. While watching the smoke, suddenly you see an explosion erupting from the site, sending up more flames and even more smoke.

You need to call work, to tell them about the delay, and automatically you begin to order the information, prioritize it. Minutes later, when you call the office, it's not the traffic that comes first. It's the fire, the chemical plant, the toxic smoke. You tell the story beginning with the most significant parts, working your way through the details. The traffic comes last.

“The All-Chem plant is on fire, exploding. There's smoke everywhere. Traffic is backed up for ten miles, at least.”

This is your summary of events. Notice that you include only key points but no details or examples.

After that you might mention the ambulances, caught up in the general pandemonium, but not until after you establish the basics. The picture of so many ambulances jammed up among the disorder, their lights and sirens adding to the chaos, is compelling. The details make the story better, more alive. By including them, you demonstrate your awareness of your audience. You are the audience's eyes and ears.

Because you started with a summary of the most important pieces of the event, you mark this as a news report. This structure is not the way you would begin a short story, for example, where you might set the scene first, then dramatically build up to the big event.

A news report is a concise, clear account of what happened, a summary overview and explanation. As clearly and directly as you can, you explain: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

And, though you write reports of all kinds using this summary and explanation structure—lab reports at school, progress reports at work, police reports for your car insurance company—here you will focus specifically on writing reports of events, news stories.

You already know quite a bit about news stories. After all, you ingest news stories as part of your daily media diet—in newspapers, on the radio, online, and on television. Think

of reading the lead of a news story at breakfast: "A tornado touched down in Marion yesterday, killing three and causing four-million dollars in damage." Or the sound of Peter Jennings's voice as he says, "Two University of Alabama researchers have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for science, today. . ."

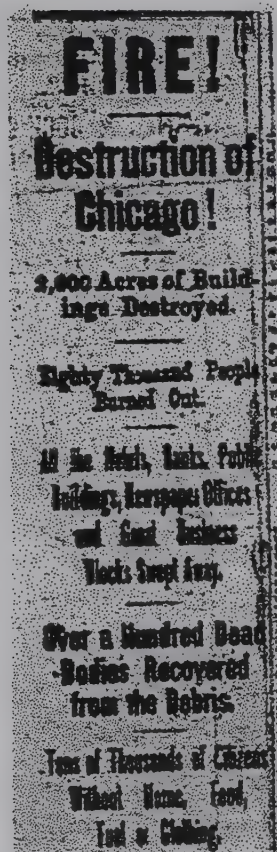
The writing skills you will learn in this chapter include:

- how to write a clear, concise summary
- how to write with objectivity and balance
- how to structure a story using order of importance
- how to research using primary sources

These skills are useful in many types of writing in many other classes. They are also important for another reason. As you write your news story, think of the old saying that news stories are the rough drafts of history. You will be, in some small measure, the recorder of your own time.

Collaborative Activity

You can do this exercise in small groups or with partners. First, read the following story, about the infamous Chicago fire of 1871.



Chicago Tribune Headline
October 11, 1871

During Sunday night, Monday, and Tuesday, this city has been swept by a conflagration which has no parallel in the annals of history, for the quantity of property destroyed, and the utter and almost irremediable ruin which it wrought. A fire in a barn on the West Side was the insignificant cause of a conflagration which has swept out of existence hundreds of millions of property, has reduced to poverty thousands who, the day before, were in a state of opulence, has covered the prairies, now swept by the cold southwest wind, with thousands of homeless unfortunates, which has stripped 2,600 acres of buildings, which has destroyed public improvements that it has taken years of patient labor to build up, and which has set back for years the progress of the city, diminished her population, and crushed her resources. But to a blow, no matter how terrible, Chicago will not succumb!

At 9:30 a small cow barn attached to a house on the corner of DeKoven and Jefferson streets, one block north of Twelfth street, emitted a bright light, followed by a blaze, and in a moment the building was hopelessly on fire. Before any aid could be extended the fire had communicated to a number of adjoining sheds, barns and dwellings, and was rapidly carried north and east, despite the efforts of the firemen. The fire seemed to leap over the engines, and commence far beyond them, and, working to the east and west, either surrounded the apparatus or compelled it to move away. In less than ten minutes the fire embraced the area between Jefferson and Clinton for two blocks north, and rapidly pushed eastward to Canal street.

The hope that, as the fire had extended to the lake at Chicago avenue, and the wind was blowing fiercely from the west and south, that part of the North Division westward of the line of the fire would escape, was an idle one. Gradually all Clark Street was included, and thence to the west until the coal beds at the river were reached. The scene about daylight was terrific. The entire North Division, from the river to the lake, and as far north as North avenue, was one seething mass of blaze. The roar of this fire was appalling.... Just before daylight there was one continuous sheet of flame...making a semicircle the inner line of which was about seven miles long. All east of this was a perfect ocean of blaze.

- As a group, make a list of the most important facts here. Then, write a three-sentence summary of what happened, beginning with the most important details.

Genre Considerations

Each time you write in a new format, you have to consider the elements that are most significant for that particular kind of writing. In a news story three elements have particular importance. In deciding what you should write about, you have to make a judgment about how newsworthy the event is. You also have to write with some measure of objectivity and present a balanced account of the event.

Newsworthiness

The first step in news writing is figuring out what makes a story newsworthy. Sometimes it's obvious, such as an earthquake or other cataclysmic event that must be reported immediately. Sometimes the story is less obvious—a doctor in town has decided to retire. To figure out the newsworthiness of a story, ask:

1. **Is the story timely in some way?** A timely story is one that has occurred recently, is related to current thinking, and concerns something in the public eye.
2. **How many people are affected?** Estimate the scope of a story. A story may have more value if the issue reported affects a substantial number of people, but this number depends on the story and on the publication. For example, the closing of a local hospital would affect more people than the closing of a single doctor's office. The way the community is affected will be a factor in judging the value of either of these stories, but so will the size of the newspaper that might print it. A small town paper might cover the closing of a single doctor's office, while a large metropolitan paper probably would not.
3. **Is the story local?** "Local" can be defined broadly as the area your newspaper covers, including anything your particular readers might find especially interesting and useful. A plane crash in Africa is a local story if five people from town were on the plane. A story reporting about a new method of harvesting grain would be of special interest to a farming community.
4. **Does the story involve celebrity—something or somebody famous?** The well-known person or place might be a celebrity in your area—a high-school coach with a great record, for example—or a celebrity in a wider sphere, such as the coach of the Dallas Cowboys.
5. **Is the story off-beat or odd?** Your story might not be timely, local, large in scope, or on a celebrity topic, but might still be newsworthy.

because it involves a novelty—the story of the teenager who stopped talking for a year, for example. The story would be interesting to many people beyond the boy’s family or friends because of its oddity.

Sometimes, though, stories need to be ferreted out. Here are a few situations in which the newsworthiness might not be immediately obvious. As you read these scenarios, think about who might find them interesting and how you might justify writing these stories.

- The university opens in the fall, and there are too many students and not enough dorm rooms.
- The town observatory announces its partnership with an observatory in China.
- A restaurant has lost its liquor license.
- The President gets a haircut.

The story about the university coming up short with dorm rooms might be good for the school paper, or even a local paper. These homeless students will enter the community as renters and consumers in the local economy. You can test this story by finding out the “scope,” or how many people are affected. How many students need to be affected by the university housing shortage before the story has value? More than ten? More than one hundred? The newsworthiness of this story depends on the size of the community and the effect of the event.

The partnership with a Chinese observatory is valuable because it’s a local story, and the local paper would eagerly print it. What about national papers? They, too might be interested in a story about cross-cultural cooperation—two countries studying the stars together.

The revoking of a single liquor license probably does not have enough horsepower to drive a story. But a bit of investigation might lead you to a better story, perhaps a story about underage drinking in town, or how dependent the local economy is on student dollars. If the restaurant were some sort of local landmark, a famous eatery that opened in the sixties and was the first vegetarian café in town, the story would pass the test of celebrity; the restaurant has historical value.

Though the President getting a haircut is usually not news, the local paper would certainly cover it because of the celebrity angle. And if the President stops traffic at the local jet port to get a haircut with all the bother and expense being billed to taxpayers, it might even be a national story.

Practice

Evaluate the “newsworthiness” of the following story ideas:

1. New trash receptacles will be placed downtown.
2. The Columbus Day holiday will not be observed on campus this year.
3. Four students reported thefts of stereo equipment from a residence hall.
4. The town will hire a new dogcatcher.
5. A local florist has just developed a new breed of orchid.

Objectivity

Reporters have historically written their stories using summary first, then explanation. This form has roots in the Civil War when reports from the battlefield were telegraphed to newspapers. Reporters wrote their stories with the overriding need to summarize events as concisely and swiftly as the media would allow. Though the technology for gathering and distributing news has evolved over time, certain characteristics have emerged, marking news writing as a distinct genre. One of these characteristics is **objectivity**, the absence of the writer's personal biases. Opinions are saved for editorials. Banishing the first person from a story, for example, is a news writer's job.

Although objectivity is a worthy goal of news writers, most journalists agree that true objectivity is almost impossible to achieve. Even the choice of what to report, whom to interview, and which details to include create a certain bias. News writers try to balance their use of details, which create color or interest in the story, with their primary goal of objectivity.

Read the two accounts below about the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986. The first is a report issued by NASA. The second is a news story written for the *Houston Chronicle*.

Beginning at about 72 seconds, a series of events occurred extremely rapidly that terminated the flight. Telemetered data indicate a wide variety of flight system actions that support the visual evidence of the photos as the Shuttle struggled futilely against the forces that were destroying it.

At about 72.20 seconds the lower strut linking the Solid Rocket Booster and the External Tank was severed or pulled away from the weakened hydrogen tank permitting the right Solid Rocket Booster to rotate around the upper attachment strut. This rotation is indicated by divergent yaw and pitch rates between the left and right Solid Rocket Boosters.

Within milliseconds there was massive, almost explosive, burning of the hydrogen streaming from the failed tank bottom and liquid oxygen breach in the area of the intertank.

The reddish brown colors of the hypergolic fuel burn are visible on the edge of the main fireball. The Orbiter, under severe aerodynamic loads, broke into several large sections

which emerged from the fireball. Separate sections that can be identified on film include the main engine/tail section with the engines still burning, one wing of the Orbiter, and the forward fuselage trailing a mass of umbilical lines pulled loose from the payload bay.

The Explosion 73 seconds after liftoff claimed crew and vehicle. Cause of explosion was determined to be an O-ring failure in right SRB. Cold weather was a contributing factor. Launch Weight: 268,829 lbs.

Now read the news account of the same incident:

Challenger Explodes/Shuttle Falls into Ocean; Crew Apparently Killed

Carlos Byars, Houston Chronicle Science Writer
1/28/1986

The space shuttle Challenger exploded in a huge ball of red and yellow flame today and fell blazing into the Atlantic Ocean, apparently killing the seven astronauts aboard, including schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe.

The explosion on the \$1.2 billion shuttle came about a minute and half after launch when the shuttle was about three miles above Kennedy Space Center.

Out of the flame of the descending shuttle came objects still belching white smoke. They were apparently the solid fuel boosters still firing. Huge chunks of the shuttle could be seen falling into the water followed by billowing smoke.

NASA made no announcement concerning the fate of the seven crew members, including McAuliffe, the 37-year-old schoolteacher from New Hampshire, the first civilian to be selected for a shuttle crew.

Observers said it was unlikely that anyone aboard survived.

There have been no fatalities in 55 previous manned U.S. space missions. Today's explosion, however, occurred 19 years and one day after three astronauts were killed on Jan. 27, 1967 in an explosion on the launch pad in the Apollo space program.

Challenger exploded before the horrified eyes of spectators at the Florida space center when the shuttle was about three or four miles high and about four miles downrange from the space center.

You can see that it is possible to have a range of “objective” writing. The NASA report tells us that events “occurred that terminated the flight.” The report emphasizes the measurements, data. On the other hand, in the news story the writer adds details in charged language—the shuttle “struggled futilely against the forces that were destroying it.”

Note also the presence of observers in the news story. Characters help to emphasize the story elements: with a crew that included the first civilian in space, a schoolteacher, many students all over the country who were among the horrified onlookers. The dramatic elements of the story emerge from the news account because of the selection of these details, the given context—no other deaths in 55 missions, schoolchildren watching, \$1.2 billion in technology, and the order in which these details are delivered.

1. Decide what the purpose for the NASA report is and write a one-paragraph evaluation of the report. Use the following questions for help: Who is the audience for this report? What does the report include or exclude and why? How might this report be useful? Use examples from the report to help you make your evaluation.
2. Compare the news story to the NASA report, noting the elements that are not in the report. Make two lists: Details you get from the news story and details you get from the NASA report. How do you account for significant information missing from one or the other?

Balance

Just as readers expect news stories to be as objective as possible, they also expect news stories to be balanced. Every story worth reporting has more than one side to it. In order to achieve balance—and maintain your credibility as a useful set of eyes and ears for the public—you have to show those differing sides.

The best way to achieve balance is to consult experts on both (or three or four) sides of the issue and quote them carefully and accurately. You don’t, of course, express your own opinion, for instance—“In my opinion, soft drinks do not cause cavities” --but you can express the idea in the form of a quote from someone else: “Dental cavities among teenagers and young adults are not linked to soft drink consumption, Virginia Tech researchers reported to the annual meeting of the American College of Nutrition.” (Press Release from Eurkalert.com)

Before using the quotation from any source, check for a possible bias of that source. If you had read the entire press release that included the above quotation, you would have found this statement: “The study of the data from that survey was supported by an unrestricted grant from the National Soft Drink Association.” No link between cavities and tooth decay? Study paid for by soft-drink companies? You had better find a dentist to tell the other side of the story. A story for BBC news used the following quote from the British Dental Association:

There is a good evidence base to show that sweetened or carbonated drinks and pure fruit juices are linked to caries (tooth decay) and erosion of dental enamel (loss of tooth surface.) We note that this new report appears to say nothing about the link between soft drinks and erosion.

Including the information from the study, the identification of the study, and the quotation from the dentists gives this story balance and allows the reader to uncover the truth. In order to give a full and factual account, you really must gather quotes from many sides of the issues you are reporting. And you need to choose good quotations—quotations that further your reader’s understanding of the story—quotations that give accurate information.

Facts and Opinion: Know the Difference

As a writer, you need to be able to distinguish between a fact and an opinion. Consider the following quotations taken from a McDonald’s quarterly report:

- A. “Despite this year’s challenges, McDonald’s has a great brand with tremendous prospects. The worldwide eating out market continues to grow, and McDonald’s intends to be part of that growth. I am confident in our business fundamental and believe we can deliver solid earnings and cash flow growth far into the future.”
- B. “In Europe, comparable sales were negative in July, but turned positive in August.”

Example A has lots of opinion—so much that, if asked to underline the opinion, you would probably underline the entire passage. A news report probably wouldn’t include any of this material.

But Example B can be proved through research. We can find a quarterly report from McDonald’s, which is a public document, open to stockholders or anyone through the Securities and Exchange Commission—sources that can verify the facts. You can’t prove that “McDonald’s intends to be part of a growth market.” This is a claim.

When trying to get balance into a story, you will, no doubt, find quotations that offer both fact and an opinion. While too many opinions, even in the form of quotations, can compromise the objectivity in a story, some opinions can be useful in giving information. For example, Joy Dehart, the head of the Public Health Department of your state, might say, “Flu season will be shorter this year.” Is this a fact? A prediction? Dehart tells you she is basing her assumption on the number of cases of flu treated by doctors in October and November of this year, compared to the same months last year. She has concluded that fewer cases this year, so far, mean a shorter flu season. Using the quotation, along with the explanation, would give your reader good information. It is an opinion, but not one based on taste or simple preference. It is a conclusion based on evidence and reasonable logic. As one editor used to say: Some facts are more true than others.

Facts can be established by “scientific” means. Laboratory tests, surveys, and observers’ testimonies are some reliable sources of what we define as “fact.” It’s important that the group responsible for gathering the evidence is qualified and has nothing to lose or gain by reporting the facts. Facts we trust are those that come from independent or objective sources, not a source that has a stake in them or will profit from them. The National Highway Transportation Board, for example, would be a more objective source of statistics on tire safety than Firestone.

Assignment

Write a 2-3 page news report suitable for publication in your school or local paper.

1. Choose an event to cover. It's best to choose a local event you can attend. Consider attending a speech, public lecture, an open meeting, a charity walk or bike ride, a book or poetry reading, or a demonstration. You might find yourself reporting on an unplanned event—an accident, robbery, announcement—in which case staying local will give you easy access to sources you can interview. Your event should be one-time and not ongoing. For example, you could cover the opening night of play, but not simply Tuesday's performance. (A story about one performance might turn into a review rather than a news story).

2. Research your event. You will need to arrange interviews with organizers, participants, and experts. You can also use your own observation, Web searches, documents, and background reading. Use at least three sources in your story.

3. Write the story using the summary and explanation organization, with the most important information loaded onto the front of the story.

Include:

- A concise, summary lead: who, what, where, when
- A clear angle: an explanation of why or how (more explanation on this follows)
- Quotations from at least three sources
- An objective voice
- A balanced view
- Clear and direct style

Warm-Up Exercise: News Story Elements

Read the following news story. As you read it, pay attention to the characteristics that distinguish it as a news story. Focus especially on the kind of information included in the story, the story's main point, the structure of the story, and the language of journalism.

400 Join Crop Walk to Fight Hunger: Bethlehem Area Council of Churches Hopes to Raise \$20,000

S. Chris Phillips, The Morning Call
10/09/1995

Four hundred people walked along the streets of Bethlehem yesterday in the 11th annual CROP Walk to fight hunger. For the first time, people in wheelchairs joined the event.

The walk, organized locally by the Greater Bethlehem Area Council of Churches, is a national event that raises money for local food assistance and worldwide famine relief.

"We come from many traditions and many churches. Today, we come together as one to raise money for the hungry," said the Rev. Gary Langensiepen of St. John's Windish Lutheran Church, Bethlehem. He prayed with the walkers in front of Bethlehem's City Hall, where the 6.2-mile walk began.

Before the walk, participants collected pledges from family, friends, and church members. Walkers now have a few weeks to collect the pledges, said organizers, who expect to collect about \$20,000 this year.

As the group walked, toddlers crunched through autumn leaves scattered along the sidewalks, and dogs dragged some walkers through the route. Some participants rode in wheelchairs and others were pulled in red wagons.

"We have kids in strollers and people in their 70s and up walking with us. Physically challenged people are joining us for this first time this year," said Bob Wingrove, CROP Walk coordinator.

Carol DePietro of the Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living organized the CROP Walk's first mile-long wheelchair route.

Valley Association for Specialized Transportation (VAST) sponsored transportation to and from the event for disabled participants.

"People with disabilities want to get involved, but we had no transportation to the walk. Now, VAST is helping us," said DePietro.

Jeffrey Went and Jesus Pagan, both 11, usually spend their weekends playing Nintendo and trading Spiderman toys, but they decided to do something different this weekend.

“We’re walking for other people. Kids that are as thin as pretzels,” said Pagan, who attends First Presbyterian Church, Bethlehem.

“There are people in Philadelphia who dig through garbages to eat,” said Went, who dragged a shiny green race car behind him as he walked.

Charles Riegel, 91, has participated in the walk for the past four years with friends from St. John’s United Church of Christ, Farmersville. “I like to walk and my church group enticed me to come along again,” said Riegel.

Catherine Zieh, director of the Bethlehem Council of Churches, explained that 25 percent of the money raised by the walk will be distributed to local charities, including New Bethany Ministries, West Bethlehem Food Bank, and the Salvation Army.

“It’s a local project that helps people across the globe and brings money back home,” she said.

The Lehigh Valley organizations that receive a share of the money raised are South Bethlehem Neighborhood Center, Northeast Ministries, 4th Street Meal Center, soup kitchens of Wesley United Church and Trinity Episcopal Church, Salvation Army, and West Bethlehem Food Pantry.

Next, make a list of the characteristics you discovered. Here are some questions to help focus your thinking:

1. What information is in the lead paragraph? How is it organized?
2. What kind of research did the writer do? How and where did the writer integrate this information into the story?
3. Underline the sentence that presents the story's main point or angle.
4. How would you define the writer's voice?
5. How would you characterize the language of the story? For example, is it plain and direct or literary, and full of figures of speech—or both?

Collect

Think of the research here as four-pronged. You will use:

1. **Primary sources:** News reporting requires you to go out into the field to interview people and to observe places and events. This firsthand information gathering is called primary source reporting. As a news reporter, you have to go to where the news is happening—attend fund-raisers or talks, interview organizers or eyewitnesses. In other writing assignments, your research often involves secondary sources—published articles and books on the subject. In news reporting, secondary sources are important also but mostly as background information, to provide context for your story.
2. **Secondary sources:** Read what has already been published about your issue or about your story's topic. You might find some past stories online, or you may need to go to the library and read old papers on microfilm and microfiche. You can use Nexus/Lexis, an online service with full text excerpts of newspaper articles, searchable by using key words.
3. **Documents:** Locate public records like notes from city council meetings, birth and death certificates, court records, marketing studies. (Some of these may be available online.) Libraries have many resources: indices, almanacs, telephone books, census data. Most important, libraries have librarians—these people can be a reporter's best tool.
4. **Your observation:** Be your readers' eyes and ears. Make notes about the setting of the event. Details add color and interest to your story. For example, in a protest, the rainbow banners, or the green T-shirts worn by the demonstrators might show the groups' organization and unity. Or you might make note of the icicles clinging to the firefighters' hats—the severity of the weather during the fire could be portrayed well in that single,

cinematic detail. You don't know what you might use until you get to the writing. Make it your work to watch the details carefully and note them copiously.

Selecting Quotations

Gather all of these quotes—long ones, short ones, ungrammatical ones, vague ones, great ones—but don't evaluate them as you make notes. Instead, make your collection as full as you can. True, it will be a mix of keepers and junk. You won't know which quotations are useful until you start to write. Some will give pure information (facts and claims) and others will give attitude (character). Take time to choose quotes for a story. Sometimes it is not what people say but how they say it. You have three ways to use material from interviews: full quotations, partial quotations, and paraphrases.

Full Quotation: Full quotations are usually a full sentence or two, transcribed exactly as spoken.

Example: "There is no evidence, at this point in time, that the death was due to foul play," said Ted Vargen, Wake County District Attorney.

◆ Use full quotations for especially well-phrased thoughts or memorable language.

Partial quotation: Selected material from an interview appears in a partial quotation, along with the attribution—the name of the source of the quotation.

Example: The victim appeared to be "agitated and confused," according to Marisol Boulanger, an eyewitness to the shooting.

◆ Use a partial quotation to capture the power of a direct quote even though the full sentence may be too long, ungrammatical, or confusing.

◆ Both full and partial quotes are most useful when the quotation is clear or provides insight into a character or helps vary the information in a paragraph.

Paraphrasing: Putting a quote in your own language can sometimes be advantageous to meaning, and it can be a good way to make information more concise, easier to understand, or more relevant.

Example: Rapid-fire gunshots came from a car that stopped briefly in front of the victim's house, according to Boulanger.

♦ Paraphrase long or wordy quotes or quotes where the language is fuzzy or vague, grammatically incorrect, or confusing.

♦ **Remember** that you do not have to use all the quotations you have gathered, especially those that state the obvious or add nothing to the factual or emotional quality of the story.

Some Tips on How to Using Quotations

- Always give attribution for quotes, citing the speaker's full name and title.

Example: "Pollution is causing asthma rates to soar," said Greg Spiro, head of Pediatrics at Faith Hospital.

- Follow a full quotation with a simple verb: "said."
- If you quote that speaker later, use just the last name in the attribution. Example: Asthma is a major public health issue, according to Spiro.
- As a rule, don't start quotations with the attribution as this tends to slow the story down.
- If you are citing a quotation you found in another source, you must give attribution to the other source, citing the publication in which the quotation first appeared and identifying the speaker. Example: School board member Raisa Perez told the *Sun-Times* last Tuesday that more students would be left out of the free lunch program if budget cuts continue.
- Use quotations from other printed sources sparingly, only if you absolutely must. If possible, replicate the quotation instead by calling the source directly or substituting a similar source and quotation that you collected yourself.

Practice:

Read the following lead.

College Park—A tornado blazed a 10-mile-long path of destruction through Central Maryland at rush hour yesterday afternoon, killing two Howard County sisters and injuring dozens of people while ripping the roofs off buildings and flinging cars through the air. (*Baltimore Sun*)

Imagine you were writing the news story to follow this lead, using the following notes gathered from interviews. Decide which quotations you would use as full

quotations, partial quotations, or paraphrased quotations. Which quotations would you not include in your story?

1. The entire family is devastated. (Dr. Clifford Turen, family friend of Colleen Patricia Marlatt and Eric Patricia Marlatt, who were killed when their car was lifted and thrown by wind)
2. The victims were sisters. (Turen)
3. The two students were killed when the storm picked up their car, which was heading in a westward direction, at a location near the East Hall residential dormitory on the main campus of the University of Maryland at University Park. The storm then threw the car into a tree located in the parking area of the East Hall. (Mark Brady, a spokesman for Prince George's county fire and EMS)
4. I ran out of the dorm to see if anybody needed help. It was 75 feet up. I saw the car flying in the air. I could see the bottom of it. It dropped. It just hit the ground. (Jason Gleeber, 19, a student from Elkton)
5. Classes will be suspended today at the University of Maryland. We're in no position to conduct business as usual. (President C. D. Mote Jr., U. of Maryland).
6. About 100 employees and customers were in the store. The storm hit and took the roof right off. It started out like it was going to be a strong thunderstorm and then you heard the wind start howling like I've never heard it before. You could then start hearing and seeing the skylights start shattering, and then the front windows started blowing in. (Eric Ziolkowshi, College Park Home Depot manager)

Select

Angle

Once you've gathered your information and conducted your interviews, you have a list of information that you will need to organize. You'll choose a focus for your story, which is called the angle.

The angle is announced in the lead—the first sentence or two of the story that presents the basic *who, what, where, when, how, why*—and developed throughout the story. (We will go into more detail about the lead in the section on Order.) The angle tells your reader the event's significance, and you can usually find the angle by locating the story's central tension or conflict.

Let's say you are writing a basic burglary story. The house at 48 Elm Street was burglarized. Jewelry and electronics were stolen. You may not know the culprit, but you do know, basically, the *who, what, where, and when*. This is a story that has interest to a community and is newsworthy in itself. But it has characteristics that make it specific. Perhaps your investigation

reveals this is the fifth burglary in that neighborhood in four months. Suddenly, your story has a meaning. It's not just a burglary, but the fifth in a series. From this context your angle emerges: a neighborhood under siege. "Police say Elm Street was the target of another burglary last night, the fifth in four months."

Or you might discover other information on the burglary story—the homeowners were asleep at the time of the burglary. This detail characterizes the burglary in a different way. You could approach this story from a different angle: "While homeowners slept soundly in their beds, a burglar stole jewelry and electronics from a residence on Elm Street last night."

Each of these approaches would be good and useful to a reader, and either would help answer the question your reader will have: how is this event significant?

Take another example: a fire in a dorm. A news story might lead with, "Hundreds of students lost all their personal possessions in a fire that raged through Clements Hall at Southcentral College last night."

The fire itself is noteworthy, but the details of the students' loss of personal property make the story significant to the reader. You could write from that angle, focusing on the human-interest side of the story. The keepsakes from home, family photos, and class notes are irreplaceable.

Or you could discover that the suspected cause of the fire was an illegal portable heater. The angle for this story might be incorporated into a lead that reads: "A portable heater is the suspected cause of a fire that raged through Clements Hall at Southcentral College last night."

Another angle might be the lax fire inspections or the outdated fire alarm systems that, if found earlier, might have prevented the fire from spreading. Depending on what you have discovered in your research, and what you deem most significant for your readers, your angle changes.

The angle—and the lead, for that matter—are designed by individual writers. They are not, remember, simple statement of fact. They are carefully crafted to give the reader an understanding of what makes the event significant, worth reading about. It's good to keep in mind that there is no single correct way to write a story: As you've seen, the same event yields different answers to "How?" and "Why?"

Practice

Write down some possible angles for each of the following stories.

- You go to a book signing at your local bookstore. The author, who is originally from your town, has written a book about his hunting expedition in Africa. Outside the bookstore, you see a picket line of animal rights activists urging people to boycott the reading. You also see a long line of people waiting to get their copies signed.
- Your college administration has banned student parking on campus. It says students should ride bikes, or take public transportation, or use a new campus shuttle service sponsored by a tobacco company. You go to the student protest. Outside, a group of environmental activists are rallying in support of the administration's ban.
- A man is robbed at gunpoint at 10 o'clock in the morning on a busy city street. No one goes to his aid. He is not hurt physically but has been robbed of his wallet and all his jewelry. It is the fifth such robbery in two months.

Order

The Inverted Pyramid

Look at the following two examples of story order. The first one is chronological order.

A few years ago scientists developed a molecule, called icon, they hoped would fight off cancer by destroying blood vessels that feed tumors. Later, icon was tested on mice, and not only did it work on the blood vessels, but it also caused the cancer to make copies of icon, spreading them through the body to attack prostate cancer and human melanoma in the mice. This year, the first trials on people will begin. (adapted from the Associated Press)

This story is organized starting at the beginning of a chain of events, working up to the most recent event, and then referring to the future. The transitions help signal this order: *a few years ago, later, this year*.

Most news stories, in contrast, are not organized chronologically. Instead, they are front-loaded, built with the essential information coming first, followed by the facts in descending order of importance. This structure, commonly known as the inverted pyramid, is the traditional order of news stories and a good structure to practice. Look at a news page and you will see lots of inverted pyramids. You may find other structures in some news stories, structures discussed in later chapters, but first it is important to understand and master the inverted pyramid.

Your news story, unlike a chronological account, should begin with a summary overview—the lead, followed by details you have ordered according to their importance. The story about the molecule might go something like this:

A new molecule that kills cancerous tumors in mice is set for human trials as early as next year, scientists say.

In laboratory tests the molecule—called icon—killed tumors by destroying the blood vessels that feed them. It also caused the cancers to produce copies of icon, which spread through the body and attacked other cancers. The process eliminated human melanoma and prostate cancers in the tested mice. (adapted from the Associated Press)

The writer here has decided that this year's trials are most noteworthy, the most important news. The story uses the latest developments first and catches up with what had happened earlier, shuffling order of sequence, focusing instead on order of importance. The beginning of human trials is most important—at least in this writer's estimation—followed by the facts of the destruction of tumors and elimination of cancer.

While you are organizing your story, you are also thinking about your lead. The lead of a news story is the first sentence or two, and it presents the summary overview that tells who, what, when, and where.

The lead

(Refer to Western Union Telegram)

Success four flights Thursday morning all against twenty one mile
Wind started from Level with engine power alone average speed
Through air thirty one miles longest 57 seconds inform Press
home Christmas. Orville Wright

A lead should be concise but full of detail, like this telegram relaying news of the first flights at Kitty Hawk. Orville Wright, sending the news of the brothers' success home to their father, gives rather specific information: four flights, the longest was thirty-one miles. Wright has a perfect lead here, including the ever-present time element, "Thursday morning." He emphasizes the significance of the flights "with engine power alone," and gives lots of significant detail, all of it in few words. Think of this economy when writing your lead—imagine you are paying by the word.

To use another comparison, writing a news lead is a little like poetry, too, in that every word counts; each word must be packed with precision and meaning. Choose the best nouns and the best verbs you can, remembering that not only does the lead summarize the event, it also must capture your readers' attention, and get them to read further.

Leads, above all, should be honest. Don't make promises the story doesn't keep. Don't pretend to know something you don't. As writer John McPhee said, "A lead should not be cheap, flashy, meretricious, blaring a great fanfare of trumpets, and then a mouse comes out of its hole."

Compare the notes to the story . . .

People in East Palo Alto don't want to see the new Ikea furniture store built there.

About 60 people held a march Tuesday night.

They marched past the City Hall and up to the city council meeting.

The vote on whether to give IKEA the go-ahead was on the agenda of the city council for that evening.

. . .with this lead from the *San Jose Mercury News* :

Some 60 demonstrators opposed to a proposed Ikea furniture store in East Palo Alto marched on City Hall on Tuesday night and flooded into a city council meeting at which a crucial vote on the project was expected later in the evening.

Notice the specific subject: “Demonstrators opposed to a proposed Ikea furniture store” (not the more generic “people”) and the active verbs: “marched” and “flooded.” Some news writers say the secret to writing a great lead is choosing the best subject and verb for your lead.

Most leads focus on what happened: a tornado touched down, a fire claimed two lives. Depending on your topic, though, you might focus your lead on who, where, or when, if these parts of the story are remarkable. Try to put the most significant element first in your lead.

- Mae Jemison, the first woman in space, spoke about the future of satellite technology in a lecture last night at the student union. (the emphasis is who)
- Howard University will be the recipient of a National Merit Fellowship for its work with gifted high-school students. (the emphasis is on who)
- Two years after pleading guilty to manslaughter, a Westbridge man took his own life. (the emphasis is on when)
- San Francisco will be the site for the new national earthquake center, the Federal Emergency Management Agency announced today. (the emphasis is on where)

Practice

Rewrite the following leads. Work on giving your reader a concise overview of the event:

- Police shut down the People’s Theater of Durham yesterday. Police conducted a search throughout the theater for stolen property after an anonymous caller reported that a custodian was storing stolen electronics in the theater.
- On Wednesday, a beige 2001 Suburban lost control on the Islington Parkway near Rawley, and the four passengers were not hurt at all. Fog may have been a factor.
- Chinenye Cooper was given an award by Stamford University for her contribution to handicapped student life at that school. She is a sophomore. The award was a \$500 grant. She lives right here in Sacramento.

Practice

Revise the following lead, cutting unnecessary words. Write a tighter, more concise lead.

In an exceptional, six-hour meeting that ran far into the wee hours, the City Council voted to hire Vin LaPorte, a local architect, contactor, and builder, to revise the original plans they had drawn up for the new schools here in town.

The body of the story

Spending extra time on your lead will prove worthwhile because the lead will give you a good blueprint for the rest of the story. Once you know who the primary players are and what the main event is, your job will be to explain the why and how of the story. To do this, you will use quotations, explain background, and fill out a balanced picture of the story. Look at the story below, the full story of the demonstration against Ikea mentioned earlier.

East P.A. Furniture Store Foes Flood Meeting: Council set to vote on project for Ikea at Hwy.101

San Jose Mercury News

9/18/2001

Some 60 demonstrators opposed to a proposed Ikea furniture store in East Palo Alto marched on City Hall on Tuesday night and flooded into a city council meeting at which a crucial vote on the project was expected later in the evening.

"We're not against development—this is just the wrong proposal for East Palo Alto," said demonstrator Belinda Rosales, who has lived in the city for 21 years. She said she hoped the demonstration would make a difference as the council deliberated.

Demonstrators chanted about the greater need for a supermarket in a town that had none and carried placards with slogans such as "Food not furniture."

If the council votes to approve a development agreement with Ikea for a 10-acre site along Highway 101, the store could open sometime in 2003, company officials say.

East Palo Alto residents who oppose the project say they fear the crush of shoppers and traffic that Emeryville experienced when an Ikea store opened there last year.

And East Palo Alto resident Dave Tschong, 69, who was among the demonstrators Tuesday night, said: "The big guys are taking over this city. They are going to push poor people out."

Ikea claims the project would bring at least \$1 million in sales tax revenue to the city annually and provide more than 500 jobs.

This year, Ikea pulled out of a proposed project in New Rochelle, N.Y., citing opposition by residents. The company also abandoned plans to build in Brooklyn, N.Y., because of environmental concerns about the site, a former coal transfer station.

- Look at paragraph 2. What function does the quotation from the demonstrator Belinda Rosales serve? Explain why you think it is or is not well placed in the story.
- Which paragraphs give the reader the context and background information for the story? Explain why you think the writer put this information at that place in the story.
- Why do you think the writer waited until paragraph 7 to give Ikea's side of the story? Explain why you agree or do not agree with that choice.

Practice: ordering information

Number the following details, facts and quotes in the order you think they should appear in a news story. (Material from: Associated Press)

"Most of our players buy their tickets at the same place week after week," lottery spokesman Leon Di Benigno said.

The winning numbers were 5, 24, 39, 41, 46, 50. The ticket was sold at 5:39 p.m., on April 21, about 5 hours before that night's drawing.

Time is running out for the winner of a \$7 million Florida Lottery jackpot.

"If you have the winning ticket, bring it in. You will be a multimillionaire," Di Benigno said.

The lottery has put up fliers at area retailers, paid \$20,000 for a full-page newspaper ad, and placed a big poster in the store where it was sold.

Lottery officials have launched a search for the winner because if he or she doesn't redeem the ticket by Oct. 18 it will be worthless.

Since Florida Lotto's inception in 1988, 18 winning tickets worth \$64.4 million have gone unclaimed.

Write

Simple Sentences

The language of journalism is direct and clear. It has to be if you want your reader to get the news quickly and understand it at a glance. That doesn't mean that there is no room for artful phrasing or arresting images. Look at the two sentences below, taken from news stories. Both use closely observed details to create vivid pictures for their readers.

A tall young man in a white shirt and incongruously wearing a white silk glove hurled a brick through the windshield of an empty bus that had been used as a barricade before the tank pushed it off the road.” (from “ Chinese Students Massacred”)

“Shot through the head, the President fell back across the rear seat of the car. Mrs. Kennedy screamed and then, softly crying, “Oh, no,” moved over to cradle his bloody head.” (from “Kennedy Slain”)

Direct, simple sentences are the best way to achieve clarity in news writing. A simple sentence consists of a subject followed by a verb followed by a direct object, if there is one. By now the reasoning for this structure should be obvious: you want your reader to know who or what was in the news (subject) and what happened it did (verb), not just in the lead but throughout the story. The subject + verb structure is also the most basic, and often the most powerful, way to build a sentence. Journalist turned short story writer, Ernest Hemingway changed the course of American fiction writing by applying the direct and powerful writing of journalism to his fiction. Here are a two simple sentences from the news stories that emulate this style.

“Two lifeless bodies were sprawled across their tricycles.” (“Chinese Students Massacred”)
“Oswald fled.” (“Kennedy Slain”)

Active Voice

Another writing tip important for news stories is to keep your sentences in the active, not passive, voice. In an active-voice sentence, the subject performs the actions, expressed by the verb:

Chemico Incorporated released chemicals into the Feather River.

In a passive voice sentence, something is done to the subject of the sentence, and it is not always clear by whom:

Chemicals were released into the Feather River. (By whom?)

Here are a few more sentences that show the difference between active and passive voice. The active voice creates a cleaner sentence and a more accurate statement.

Passive: Mistakes were made.

Active: I made a mistake.

Passive: The accident was investigated by the committee.

Active: The committee investigated the accident.

Passive: City Hall was marched on by twelve angry citizens.

Active: Twelve angry citizens marched on City Hall.

That said, there are times when the passive verb choice expresses your idea better than the active verb. Sometimes passive verbs allow you to emphasize the more significant parts of your sentences, especially in the lead. Here’s the Associated Press’s lead from the first-day story of Abraham Lincoln’s assassination.

Washington, Friday April 14, 1865—The President was shot in a theater tonight, and perhaps mortally wounded.

Two reasons spring to mind about why the passive voice works for this lead. One is that the news is about the President and that he had been shot, not about the murderer, John Wilkes Booth. If the reporter had written “John Wilkes Booth shot the President tonight...” the lead would have suggested that it was Booth who was important, not President Lincoln.

The second reason is more practical. At the time of the story, the reporter did not yet know the identity of the murderer. Booth was still at large.

Being aware of the passive voice, and using it sparingly and only for emphasis, is best. Compare these two examples:

Passive:

Eight stores have been lost since January at Ketchikan’s only mall, and an announcement has been made that Bon Marche clothing store, another of the mall’s largest tenants, will be closed at the end of the year.

Active:

Ketchikan’s only mall has lost eight stores since January, and another of the mall’s large tenants, the Bon Marche clothing store, has announced that it will close at the end of the year.

(*Ketchikan Daily News*)

Patrol your story for passive verbs and consider rewriting. Though you can’t change quotations, you might paraphrase a quotation that relies on passive voice.

Writer’s Notebook

Here are some exercises to help you jump-start your news story.

1. Read through today’s newspaper. Make a list of newsworthy topics that are covered in the hard-news stories, not the features or commentaries. Brainstorm a list of topics you could cover, either as follow-up stories or as related topics.
2. Choose two stories in today’s newspaper. Read them carefully and figure out their angles. See how many other angles you could approach the story from. Try to generate at least three other angles for each story. Write a lead sentence for each of the new angles you created.
3. If your city or town has two competing newspapers, read the same story in both papers. (You could also read your local paper and one of the big city papers like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Chicago Tribune*, all of which you can find online.) Compare the coverage of the stories, looking at the headline, the lead, the angle, and the writing. Can you find any bias in either paper?
4. Using the topic of today’s lead story in the newspaper, interview two friends and find out their opinions on the topic. Write a short (3-4

paragraph) news story on the local reaction to this event, integrating at least two quotations from your friends.

Here are a few creative ways to practice news writing style and structure:

5. Write a lead paragraph for the following story. Set it in the present time, and write it for tomorrow's paper:
In Verona, Italy, the teenage children of two feuding families fall in love. Juliet Capulet and Romeo Mountague, with the help of the local friar, Friar Lawrence, escape from their homes and plan to meet at a remote family tomb and then marry secretly. Juliet arrives first. She takes a powerful sleeping potion as she waits for her lover. When Romeo shows up, he mistakenly believes Juliet has committed suicide, takes out his knife, and kills himself. When Juliet wakes up, she sees her dead lover, and, tragically, kills herself with the same knife.
6. Think of a fairy tale you remember well—or reread some of your old favorites. Choose one (*Cinderella*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Snow White*) and rewrite it as a news story, dateline today.
7. Write a letter home—or to a faraway friend—about your life this week, using news story form and structure. Make sure your lead summarizes the news, that you have a clear angle, and that you organize your information in order of importance. Don't make anything up.

Peer Editing and Revision

Use the questions to help revise your own news story, or to help you comment on a classmate's news story:

1. Is the topic newsworthy? Does it pass the tests of being timely, affecting many people, being local, or being about important or unusual people or events?
2. Is the voice consistently objective? If you see any first-person pronouns, rewrite. Point out any biased language, and find a more neutral way to phrase the point.
3. Does the lead answer the basic *who*, *what*, *when*, *where* questions?
4. Does the rest of the story answer *how* or *why*? Do you see enough support for the angle?
5. Look at the structure of the story. Is the most important information presented high up in the story?
6. Does each paragraph follow in descending order of importance?
7. Can the story be reordered, or should anything be added, or cut?
8. Is the story balanced? With enough quotes from all sides of the issue?

Readings

In the following news story, Rachel Freed, a student, reports on a speech—the type of article many beginning news writers will take on. Reporting on a speech means thinking about the context and content of the speech. It's not news that a Governor gave a speech. Governors speak all the time. Here, Freed focuses on “where” —the significance of the location of the speech and how it relates to the main points of the speech. When you are writing about events like speeches, try to focus on what your reader will find most interesting or relevant.

Cellucci Delivers Historic Speech in Lowell **By Rachel Freed**

LOWELL—Marking the first time in the history of the Commonwealth that a governor reports on the state of the state from outside the State House, Republican Governor Paul Cellucci delivered his historic 2000 State of the State Address last Thursday evening in the C. W. Irish Auditorium in Lowell.

“I am here in Lowell because the state of our state isn't about the state of affairs inside the State House. It's about the state of our families here in Lowell...and in Lowell, and across Massachusetts, the state of our state is the strongest it has ever been,” said Cellucci.

Cellucci informed the 750 assembled in Lowell and a live television audience of his plans for future investment. The local audience included members of the Legislature, city officials, invited dignitaries, and the public. He addressed statewide concerns such as health care, taxes, and education.

In response to the thousands of calls the state received regarding health care coverage, Cellucci replied, “No one has lost coverage or access to medical care, and no one will. While many issues divide the political leadership in our state, on one issue we stand united: the citizens of Massachusetts will continue to have access to quality health care.”

Following roaring applause, Cellucci challenged House Speaker Thomas Finneran and Senate President Thomas Birmingham to place a Patient's Bill of Rights “on my desk ASAP that protects every consumer of a health maintenance organization in this state.”

Cellucci laid out his plans for fighting Massachusetts's high cost of living with an income tax cut from 5.85% to 5%. Not only will it keep the economy strong and the state competitive, Cellucci reasoned, it will ensure the economic future.

“If the Legislature won't join us and cut your taxes, we'll beat them at the ballot box in November and do it ourselves,” he said.

Cellucci labeled Massachusetts a leader in the economic marketplace. He spoke of leading the fight against taxation of electronic commerce.

Because of the alarming MCAS scores in the past two years, Cellucci announced a series of new initiatives that include assessing schools that continually fail to improve and testing math teachers.

Cellucci stated the need for affordable housing while still preserving open space and issued \$9 million to cities and towns for community planning.

“This is my first State of the State,” said audience member Aaron Goldfarb, 48, who is a Boston resident. “I think Cellucci's speech was well written. He sounded very confident, and his initiatives seem on track for impressive performance in the future.”

Lieutenant Governor Jane Swift provided opening remarks and a call to order, followed by the Massachusetts State Police Color Guard's Posting of Colors. The Angels Among Us singers sang the national anthem, and the Lowell High School a cappella choir sang "Go the Distance." Father John Hanley offered a prayer and a benediction.

Immediately following the speech, Cellucci answered questions regarding his speech in a Lycos online chat room and attended a reception in the Lowell High School cafeteria.

Talking Points

1. Why is this speech newsworthy? Where might it be published?
2. What information do you get in the lead sentence? Which of the 4 Ws—who, what, where, when—are answered?
3. What is Freed's angle? Where does it appear?
4. What kind of reporting did Freed do? What sources did she use?
5. If you were her editor, what other information might you ask her to find for this story?
6. If you were her editor and had to cut two paragraphs in order to fit in that day's paper, which would you cut? Why?

The Markets

Your chances of getting your local news story published are good. Your college paper is a good place to start, but you can also check out your town or city papers. Most towns have several newspapers, ranging in size from the small community papers to the Metro or local section of a big-city paper.

You can call or email a "query" asking whether the editor at the paper would be interested in your story. This query would be a brief message giving the editor some idea about the topic—you can even send your lead and add a quick question: "Are you interested in . . .?" Or you can send the completed story, along with information about how to contact you—for revision, other assignments, or a place to send your payment. With your manuscript include a brief cover letter with your name, address, phone number, and email address. If you want the manuscript returned, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Another way to go about publishing your news writing is to call and ask for a story assignment. Editors might ask for a writing sample before giving you a try. If you like writing news, you can even become a regular "stringer" —or freelance writer—and get a specialty. Maybe you enjoy going to auto shows. If you query in advance of the show, you might get a job covering it—attending it and then writing the story. Editors like to have a list of people they can count on to report specific kinds of events—your "beat" could be the auto shows. After you become known to an editor, you might not have to query all the time. The editor might call you with an assignment.

Chapter 3

Memoirs

"If you want to write, you can. Fear stops most people from writing, not lack of talent, whatever that is. Who am I? What right have I to speak? Who will listen to me if I do? You're a human being, with a unique story to tell, and you have every right. If you speak with passion, many of us will listen. We need stories to live, all of us. We live story by story. Yours enlarges the circle."

-Richard Rhodes-

Definition

We are sitting on the bench in front of our building, and the kids are playing. The pregnant lady from the first floor who is watching Sky News comes out to her terrace and tells us, "Get ready, the planes started from Aviano." Half an hour later, we hear sirens.

It is April 1999, and Dragana Zarevac is waiting for the bombs to fall on Belgrade, Yugoslavia. NATO forces have begun an assault against Yugoslavia—an effort to stop the killing of ethnic Albanians in nearby Kosovo. When you read Dragana's story, the one she sends in emails to a *Boston Globe* reporter, it is striking that in the midst of all the horror—news about the most recent bombing, the one that sparked the chemical poison alert—she is compelled to tell her story, sending it out in emails, to anyone who will listen. Small details bring her story home: She baked a cherry cake; her husband built some shelves. It is good to have no cigarettes, she says—easier to quit after trying for so long.

You tell your life stories, every day, in bits and pieces, as Dragana does in her emails. Your stories may not be as dramatic as hers; you may not be in the middle of war. But you can find good stories—stories worth telling—in the everyday dramas of your life: a disappointment or discovery, a big decision, a change of heart.

Memoir, a true story about a meaningful event in your life, is a form you can use to tell these stories. Part of the power of memoir springs from its truthfulness: these stories really happened.

As you know, news stories are also about real events and real people. The difference between a news story and a memoir may lie in their respective functions. The primary purpose of a news story is to bring information to the reader quickly and efficiently. The primary purpose of a memoir is to bring the reader to the information in an artful and engaging way, *recreating* the event for the reader, rather than *reporting* on what happened.

In writing a memoir, you can employ techniques usually associated with writing fiction: using detail, description and dialogue to recreate the event, or, in more literary language, "render the scene." Just as filmmakers create scenes to tell their stories, you put your characters in a specific place—in time, in space, and in a cultural context (setting). You reveal who they are by what they say (dialogue) and what they do (action).

As you think about a meaningful story to tell from your own life, remember that you have to write your memoir with a public audience in mind. In other words, you don't want to write stories that are not appropriate for the eyes and ears of others, that may be too private, intimate, or embarrassing. You have a story to tell, and it has to have meaning and resonance, not just for you but especially for your readers.

It is best to imagine your readers as "intelligent but ignorant." What this means is that the readers are smart but don't necessarily know who you are or what your story is about. Your job as a writer is to engage those readers, to tell your story so well that you make them care about you and your story. Perhaps, Dragana Zarevac couldn't imagine her specific readers in Boston, but she wrote with such telling detail and simple humanity that hundreds of readers on the other side of the world from her war-torn city opened their papers every day to read her story.

In this chapter you will learn:

- to write a story with character, conflict, setting, and theme
- to "show" through detail, dialogue and description
- to create a solid narrative structure for your story

Collaborative Activity

- Write down notes for any story you've heard lately that was interesting to you. It could be something that happened to you or to a friend. It could be funny or weird or sad or coincidental. Don't take more than ten minutes to write down the basic story.
- Look over your story and write a sentence about its meaning. Why did you choose to tell this particular story?
- Have at least five people tell their stories to the group or the class. As you listen to the stories, jot down what else you want to know about the story.
- After all the stories have been read, talk about

-why the stories were interesting

-what details would make the story even more interesting

-what elements the stories had in common

Genre Considerations

Some people think that it is easy to place any piece of writing in one of two categories: narrative writing or expository writing. And it is very easy to tell the difference between the two: If exposition, as in an informative essay, explains ideas, then narrative shows—to show ideas, you need to make them visual, make pictures in your reader's mind. You will find bits of stories in exposition, though, and pieces of exposition in narrative. Some types of writing, like the personal essay, combine the two types.

The techniques you use to tell a good story, one that has a point to make, will lend themselves to other types of writing. Brief narrative passages can wake up an otherwise dull

piece of exposition. Compelling short narratives can be persuasive in an argument, and a narrative opening can draw your reader into an article. You'll learn more about how to use narrative in other types of writing later. First, understand the basic elements: character, conflict, and setting.

Character

Characters are the people in a narrative. They are key to drawing your reader into your story. Most people read (or listen to or watch) stories because they're interested in people. They want to know about the characters' needs and motivations, how they act and react in certain situations, how they change or don't change. As you read Dragana's email diary, for example, you might find yourself more interested in the characters than the war. Why does Dragana bake a cake before the bombing begins? Why does her husband build shelves for a house that might be destroyed within hours?

Character in Action.

The answers to these questions are complicated; they give us insight into the inner workings of character. From reading about the people in Dragana's story, some might conclude that they are truly brave—by forging ahead in the face of adversity, they are earning the right to be called “survivors.” Somebody else might see Dragana and her husband's domestic activity as denial, a way of pretending they aren't in the middle of war as they occupy themselves with everyday activities. The point of creating complex characters is that you create real people for your reader, people who are complicated and have many dimensions.

Showing the characters of your stories in action—showing their responses to obstacles—is your way of giving evidence of these dimensions. Later, we might see them do something else—such as take the cake to an elderly neighbor—and the theme of their bravery will more clearly emerge as a pattern: this is the kind of people they are. You saw them in action; over a period of time, their actions added up to a clear impression. Giving clear images, particularly of characters in action, helps the reader understand them as people.

Character Arc.

The main character of your story—sometimes called the protagonist—will be central to the plot, or the series of events that make up the story. This person goes through some change in the story—or resists change—but, nevertheless, in some big or small way, the protagonist is different by the end of the story. In the course of this change, also called a “character arc,” the plot has unfolded.

Not every character in your stories will be fully developed, though. Some will be minor characters—they are in the story simply to move the plot along. The police officer with the big sunglasses that made him look like a bug—the one who gave you the speeding ticket on the fateful day you also got caught running a red light—will appear only for a moment. The officer will not get the same kind of attention as you, the main character, or as your mother, who will learn about your trouble during the course of the story.

Still, all characters require careful attention. They should be clearly drawn.

Point of View.

Art students will tell you the most difficult assignment they are given—and they are almost always given this assignment in a beginning drawing class—is to draw a self-portrait. Drawing yourself is complicated by the fact that you can't see your own face. Writing about yourself as a character is the same sort of challenge.

A first-person point of view is limited to only what an individual character can see or feel or know. Writing a memoir requires a first-person point of view—a limited way of looking at things. For example, when you rolled down the car window to see why the police officer was stopping you, you can't say your face was crimson red. How could you know that? You could, however, feel the heat in your cheeks pulsing. Or you could, possibly, see your face reflected in the mirrored sunglasses the officer was wearing—but this needs to be clear to your reader.

You might write in a point of view that is limited to your knowledge and understanding at the time of the story. "I'm looking at the officer for some signal that he's not mad. All I see is me, my red-face, all guilty-looking, staring back at myself in his big, mirrored sunglasses."

You might also write in the first-person point of view that expresses after-thought—an understanding of the event that has ripened with time. "I looked at the police officer's face for some signal that he wasn't mad at me. I wouldn't find out until later that the officer was my mom's high-school sweetheart, and a really nice guy. At that moment all I saw was me, my red face, all guilty-looking, staring back at myself in his big, scary, mirrored sunglasses."

You can't, though, know what the officer is seeing (unless you see it too) or thinking. This kind of statement—"He thought I was a stupid kid"—is third-person point of view—*he* thought, not *I* thought—and in a memoir you should remain in the first person point of view.

Character-Driven Stories.

When used well, the first person point-of-view can be a good tool in story-telling—an effective way to get your reader into your shoes. This is especially true because your story needs to be "character driven" and not "plot driven." Here's the difference between the two: A plot-driven story is one in which something outside the character imposes decisions on the character: for example, a snowstorm closes school and you don't have to give that speech you were dreading. This story doesn't tell much about how you overcame obstacles and experienced a change. Though the point of view might be first-person here, the lack of personal insight could make it anyone's story—anyone who was also dreading giving a speech.

A character-driven story, on the other hand, focuses on the change in character—a snowstorm confines your family—you and your twelve-year-old brother, specifically—in the same two-room hunting cabin for seven days and you have to figure out how to get along with him. Though this story is initiated by the snow, the real story is in your getting by during those days and what you're left with at the end of this experience. Perhaps you've discovered a deeper affection for your brother, a realization of your blood ties. Or perhaps you've discovered the opposite—the insight that you two will never get along, will always be at loggerheads. This story reveals an inner change in character from a very specific, first-person point of view.

Practice:

Read the following excerpt from the memoir "In The Woods" by Leslie Rubinkowski, about his grandfather.

He had his teeth pulled around 1945 but hated the way his false set felt so he went around toothless. He wore his teeth only for special occasions, like

weddings and funerals. At those times he disappeared into his room and emerged wearing a blue suit, white shirt, black shoes. He lingered outside his door, studying the plastic runner in the hall, and when his eyes darted up, his smile shone like a burst of flashbulb, an unexpected slice of moon, and from the living room everyone already dressed and waiting would smile back and say how nice he looked, and he would open his mouth a little more and his eyes would get shiny behind his glasses and he would study the runner again.

In this short passage, you get to know a little about the character of the grandfather.

- Describe your impression of him—what kind of person is he?
- What does Rubinkowski imply about the way his grandfather feels all dressed up and wearing his false teeth?
- Where is the speaker watching from?
- How does Rubinkowski feel about his grandfather? What details imply this feeling?

Practice:

Write a paragraph about a person you know well. Don't tell us what you know about this person, or your feelings. Put the character in motion, in a scene.

Conflict

Conflict is the struggle that drives the story forward. All the scenes are designed around advancing the conflict—making it more pronounced. This struggle can come from inside—you change your mind about majoring in biology—or it can come from outside—your parents tell you they are getting a divorce, and you have to decide where you are going to live. Over the course of a story the conflict becomes aggravated—it gets worse. The tension of the story must gain momentum slowly, incrementally. For a conflict to be logical, your reader must know:

- What is the character's motivation?
- What are the stakes?
- What are the obstacles?

These three questions can help define a conflict in a story, and give you a blueprint for the plot. Your character needs to have clear motivations to grapple with a conflict, and your character needs to have something on the line, something at stake. The obstacles are the episodes or scenes that show the main character's struggle.

To help you understand these concepts, let's look at a very basic story: The big tennis match "you" played against another singles player from Chapel Hill High School. You can use the questions of motivation, stakes, and obstacles to help you understand how to tell the story.

First, what motivated you in this match? Winning, of course, but this is true of all tennis matches. Every sporting event could list this as the main conflict. That's why the motivation needs to be clearer, especially in this type of story. What was so important about winning this time? Perhaps you had been beaten by your opponent before, and it was a grudge match. Maybe you had lost every match this year, and you have to win this to feel—and prove to the coach—that you're good enough to be on the team. Maybe your team had never won a tennis match against Chapel Hill. By clearly defining a specific character's motivation,

and not just the average, generic tennis player's motivation, you tell a better story, a more specific story. A specific story is more compelling than a typical story.

Second, what was at stake? Since you had been beaten before, certainly your ego had a stake in the match. Maybe your place on the team was in question—not just bragging rights but your position on this team. Maybe it was your image in your coach's eye, or your self-esteem. Maybe your school's reputation was at the heart of this story. The stakes in a story can turn a typical or average story (the day I took my driver's test) into a specific story (I needed to pass my driver's test so I could drive to my new job). Knowing what's at stake adds to the drama of the story and helps your reader care about the character's success (or failure).

Third, what were the obstacles? You could never win the game if you couldn't concentrate because of your nerves—your mind was your own obstacle. You had just recovered from a bad muscle pull in your left arm—your body, your physical ability was an obstacle. The other player had a reputation for her great backhand. You had gotten wrong-footed by other players with great backhands. At the time of day your match began, the sun was directly behind your opponent, a glare that obstructed your clear vision of the ball. The circumstance—nature itself—was against you.

You might not know everything about motivation, stake, and obstacle before you write your story. Some of these elements might emerge as your writing process takes you into discovering theme or meaning. Use the questions about conflict to help you test your story for focus:

- Is my character motivated to take on the struggle, instead of ignoring it?
- What does my main character have to lose or gain—how significant is the struggle?
- What are the obstacles that systematically act against my character?

You can even focus your brainstorming on these questions as a way to get started.

Practice

Choose a conflict you have experienced, perhaps in a sports event or a debate, a writing contest or a card tournament. It doesn't matter whether you won or lost.

- Describe the conflict in a sentence.
- Define your motivation.
- List the stakes for you.
- Describe the obstacles that stood in your way.

Setting

The setting of the story is the time, place, and social or cultural context. Most memoir writers establish the setting early in the piece to bring the reader more fully into the remembered place, and this can be done in a very subtle and concise way. Look at the setting from the lead of *Dream House* by Bernard Cooper.

My mother and father and brother were asleep. It was quiet except for the ticks and groans of our Spanish house contracting in the cold. Degree by degree the temperature had dropped; November deepened. Undertones of orange were gone from the sky, the threat of rain sustained for weeks. What was to come was held in suspension, waited to happen: the blast of pain in my brother's chest, sensation drained from his fingers and toes, the blood in his body freed from its boundaries, leaving his lips, the ambulance attendants surging through our door, strangers in white who flanked a gurney, my father begging them not to use the siren--whatever you do, don't use the siren--afraid the sound would frighten his son.

But none of this had happened yet. It was just after dawn. A pale light filled the hall. I stood in the doorway and stared at my parents sprawled in sleep. Their limbs were flung at improbable angles. Their mouths were slack. Beneath closed lids, eyes followed the course of dreams whose theme I tried to guess. But their faces--sunken in a stack of pillows, released from the tension of fear and hope--were emptied of all expression.

This opening reveals a great deal of information about the setting. We can guess the location--western or southwestern U.S. (California, Arizona) from the detail about the Spanish-style house, and we know the time of year, November. But we get many more layers of setting here. First, the backdrop of the story is threatening: something is "held in suspension" something is waiting to happen. This atmosphere of threat is built up by the rain that doesn't come, and the night noises of the house. This threat is realized in the catalogue of detail about the brother's illness. Cooper abruptly disrupts the momentum of the emergency with the simple statement: "But none of this had happened yet." The scene he portrays next is quiet, nearly serene. The cumulative effect of all this is the setting for this story: the story takes place inside a family in trouble.

Setting has a profound effect on the meaning of a story. The setting is crucial in a story about a first job, for example. The country club where you were a caddy will present you with a different set of conflicts and connotations than the Dunkin' Donuts where somebody else worked. Each setting provides a different cultural and social context for a story about "first responsibility." Your setting adds meaning to the story.

Practice: Read

In *Autobiography of a Face*, Lucy Grealy describes a place: stables at which she worked when she was fourteen years old, and in charge of the ponies for children's birthday parties. At this point in the story, childhood cancer surgery has left her face disfigured; half her jaw is missing. She can't keep her mouth completely closed, and her hair is still growing in from the chemotherapy. Look at the way she gives her reader not just a place but also a context--social and cultural--in the following passage:

No one at Diamond D knew how to properly care for horses. Most of the animals were kept outside in three small, grassless corrals. The barn was on the verge of collapse; our every entry was accompanied by the fluttering sounds

of startled rats. The “staff” consisted of a bunch of junior high and high school kids willing to work in exchange for riding privileges. And the main source of income, apart from the pony parties, was hacking—renting out the horses for ten dollars an hour to anyone willing to pay. Mrs. Daniels bought the horses at an auction whose main customer was the meat dealer for a dog-food company; Diamond D, more often than not, was merely a way station. The general air of neglect surrounding the stable was the result more of ignorance than of apathy. It’s not as if we didn’t care about the horses—we simply didn’t know any better.

In the above excerpt, you get a lot of information about this place.

- In a few words, describe the Diamond D.
- What does Grealy imply about her feelings about this place?
- What do you expect from a story set at the Diamond D stables?

Practice: **Write**

In a short paragraph, describe a place. Don’t tell what it means to you, but imply the meaning through your details.

Assignment

In four or five pages, write a memoir. Keep your focus narrow; stick to one event or connected series of events. Show a change: a change of mind or heart, a discovery, a confirmation or contradiction of a belief, a disappointment, a decision.

Include the following narrative elements:

- Scenes full of detail and imagery
- Characters with motivation and depth
- Theme and clear conflict
- Incremental, logical development of the plot

Warm-up Exercise: **Show, Don’t Tell**

One way to create scenes for stories is to adhere to the “show, don’t tell” rule that you’ve probably heard since grade school. This is one of those rules that is easier to understand than to do. But your memoir is a perfect place to practice that skill.

When you write, you “show” through vivid, descriptive images. Sometimes, of course, you also “tell” when you need to summarize a scene or move your reader quickly to a new scene. “My best friend lied to me” is an example of “telling.” It quickly summarizes what happened, and gives necessary

information, but it doesn't create a mood or reveal the tension of the moment. To show that scene, you might write,

Jason walked into the room, his eyes darting from face to face.
He wouldn't look at me. No one spoke.
"Did you lie to me?" I finally asked.
"Yes," he said. "I did."

"Showing" allows the reader to experience the story firsthand rather than to be told about what happened. Jason's darting eyes show that he is ill at ease. His deliberate lack of eye contact and the silence enhance the sense of nervousness. Those few details reveal the emotion of the scene, a tense mood that is entirely absent in the mere sentence "My best friend lied to me."

Mark Twain explained this difference by advising writers, "Don't say the old lady screamed—bring her on and let her scream." "Showing" through well-crafted scenes invites your reader into your story, though you will inevitably use some "telling" in your story to knit the scenes together or move the story forward.

Practice: Read the opening scene of Tobias Wolff's memoir of his childhood in *This Boy's Life*.

Our car boiled over again just after my mother and I crossed the Continental Divide. While we were waiting for it to cool we heard, from somewhere above us, the bawling of an airhorn. The sound got louder and then a big truck came around the corner and shot past us into the next curve, its trailer shimmying wildly. We stared after it. "Oh, Toby," my mother said, "he's lost his brakes."

The sound of the horn grew distant, then faded in the wind that sighed in the trees all around us.

By the time we got there, quite a few people were standing along the cliff where the truck went over. It had smashed through the guardrails and fallen hundreds of feet through empty space to the river below, where it lay on its back among the boulders. It looked pitifully small. A stream of thick black smoke rose from the cab, feathering out in the wind. My mother asked whether anyone had gone to report the accident. Someone had. We stood with the others at the cliff's edge. Nobody spoke. My mother put her arm around my shoulder.

For the rest of the day she kept looking over at me, touching me, brushing back my hair. I saw that the time was right to make a play for souvenirs. I knew she had no money for them, and I had tried not to ask, but now that her guard was down I couldn't help myself. When we pulled out of Grand Junction I owned a beaded Indian belt, beaded moccasins, and a bronze horse with a removable, tooled-leather saddle.

- How would you characterize the young Toby Wolff as he presents himself in this scene? What details point you to that interpretation?
- How would you characterize Wolff's mother in this scene? What details point you to that interpretation?
- What is her response to witnessing the accident? How do you know?

- Why do you think Wolff writes a detailed list of the souvenirs he received? Tell why it is or isn't effective.

Practice: Write

- ◆ Write a paragraph that “tells” what Wolff “shows” in this scene.
 - ◆ Rewrite the following lines so that they “show” rather than “tell.” To make the exercise more challenging and creative, follow the rules in parentheses.
1. My brother was so embarrassed. (Don't use the words “embarrassed” or “red.”)
 2. My messy room needed cleaning. (Don't use the words “mess” or “chaos.”)
 3. It was a hot, summer day. (Don't use the words “hot” or “summer.”)
 4. I thought the boring class would never end. (Don't use the words “boring” or “droning” or “monotonous.”)
 5. The truck went over the cliff. (Don't use the words “crashed,” “barreled,” “smashed,” or “tumbled.”)

Collect

Researching your memoir

Since memoir is grounded in memory, it may seem surprising to talk about research. But memories are often faulty or incomplete, and there are interesting ways to fill in the gaps—but not with invented details, the material for fiction.

When you write a memoir, or any work of non-fiction, you enter into a contract with your reader—unwritten but understood—that you won't lie, you won't make anything up, and you will tell the story as accurately as possible.

One of the best ways to remember details, particularly sensory details, is by writing. Freewriting works well here. Jot down all the words, images, ideas, and details you can remember about the place or person or event. Finding words to make vague memories concrete is a way to clarify and recall long-forgotten details.

If you remember a certain piece of music that connected to a time you are writing about, listen to it. If some particular food was central to the experience, have some. If the place is close by, visit. Do anything possible to recreate the details vividly for yourself; in that way, you can pass them on to your reader.

Researching your non-fiction story can follow more traditional paths as well. One such path might lead you to the library—or online—to find information about the historical time and place of the story. If your story is about an event that happened to you in the 1980s, for example, you might want to leaf through magazines published during the eighties to remember the culture of the so-called “me-generation.” The names of the bands, the trends, the advertisements, the fashions, the political scene during the Reagan era could help clarify your memories as well as provide authentic detail for your story.

Practice

- ◆ Choose a scene from your childhood, perhaps a place you visited often, for holidays or for a vacation. Write a list of sensory details. Here are some prompts to get you started:

1. What did you see? *The weather, somebody's clothing, a clock, a gesture, a hairstyle, the light, shadows, colors. . .*
2. What did you hear? *Song fragments, voices, dialogue, footsteps, plastic rattling, metal grinding...*
3. What did you smell? *The rain on the hot sidewalk, mildew, bleach, garlic, the hamster cage...*
4. What did you taste? *Your own salty sweat, metal, sour milk, stale bread...*
5. What did you feel—touch? *The wire of your braces digging into your cheek; your scratchy wool sweater; the smooth, cool surface of the closed door. . .*

- ◆ Write a preliminary list of sources you might consult to research the following stories. Be sure to include people you might interview, places you might visit, and books, magazines, music, or films you might consult.

- a childhood holiday gone awry
- a teenage heartbreak
- moving to a new place
- an accident—funny or sad

Select

Finding a Theme

Simply put, the theme is what your story is really about, its point. The theme of your teenage heartbreak story could be the innocence of first love or it could be about the loss of innocence. The point of a story about moving to a new place could be that change was painful for you as a shy child or it could be about how change allowed you to reinvent yourself. It doesn't matter at all what theme you choose to reveal in your story; it is essential, however, for a story to have a theme in order for it to have meaning to others.

One word of caution here: Don't confuse *theme* with *moral*. A moral or a message is not a theme, but one of those life-lessons, most of which are boring and trite. You know you've lit on a moral when you can reduce the entire meaning of your story to a cliché, *you can't tell a book by its cover* or *easy come, easy go*. Most memorable stories are about something deeper, more meaningful than a lesson learned. Surprising or unexpected twists, complex responses, expectations turned upside down make for interesting and realistic themes.

Sometimes it happens that you write a story that you know you want to tell, that has meaning for you, but you can't figure out the theme. "It just happened," you might say. Take heart in the fact that most stories that you find compelling are compelling for a reason. They

have significance beyond the retelling of the events themselves. Sometimes it becomes your job as a writer to discover that meaning not just for your reader but also for yourself.

When you have written a first draft of a story, and you can't figure out the theme, reread the story, looking for clues in your own language and imagery to see what is at the heart of the story. Sometimes you may find a pattern. For example, one student drafted a story about her embarrassment while dancing on the stage in middle school. The other students were talking, laughing, making fun of her. It was a pivotal moment for her, but she couldn't figure out the theme, what the story was really about.

When she reread her own language about her "flesh-colored leotard" and her "naked feet," she realized that she was writing about being metaphorically stripped of her dignity. With that insight, she was able to deepen her story, add language that emphasized her sense of exposure, and find embedded within her own story more universal themes about vulnerability and violation.

Once you discover your theme, make sure you uncover it in your story. Every aspect of your story—character, conflict, and setting—can develop this theme, and your language, descriptive details and images, should help reveal it to your reader. All of this work serves to add focus, coherence, and meaning to your story.

Order

Building a narrative structure

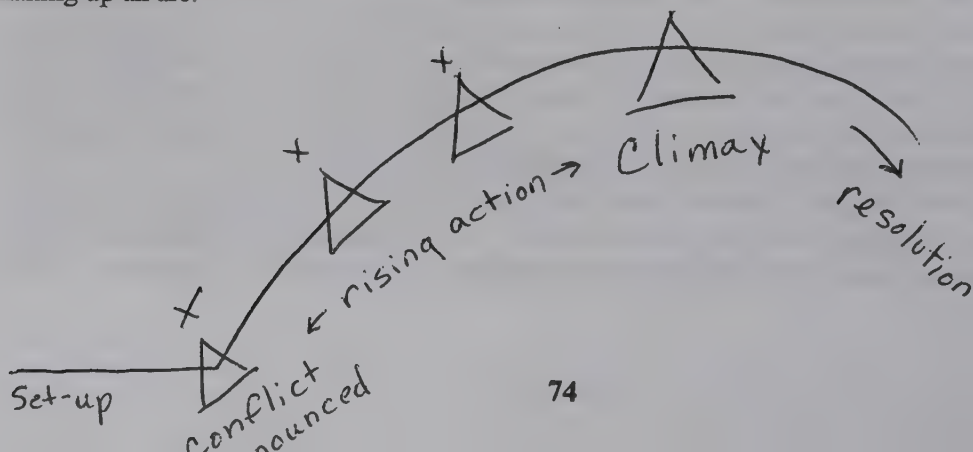
The structure for your story, based on the incremental development of your conflict, can take many forms. The most obvious form is chronological order, discussed briefly in the News Reports chapter. You may recall the example there: reporting what happened first, second, and third. This is one way to organize a story.

Other ways to organize a story are through the use of flashbacks and flash-forwards. You might begin the story at the end—as Bernard Cooper does in the excerpt in the “setting” section, with the brother being taken to the hospital as his illness becomes critical. You would need to provide good transitions in order to work your way back to the beginning. Cooper uses the sentence: “But none of this had happened yet.” In effect, he restarts the story, using chronological order this time around.

Tinkering with the chronology of a story doesn't change the basic requirement of narrative order: that the conflict progress incrementally, in steps.

Let's look at a typical narrative structure. Understand that this structure can be—and is often—modified by skillful writers. It's not a bad idea to learn the basic structure before experimenting with different forms.

Basically a story has a beginning, middle, and end, and you can think of these pieces making up an arc.



Lead and set-up

Your story needs a strong opening. The beginning of your narrative is your one shot at hooking a reader. It's a tease into the story, a temptation. Your opening also sets the tone for the story.

Beyond the attention-getting aspect of the lead, the opening of a narrative gives your reader a sense of who, what, where and when—news story elements, but in a narrative style: *who* is character, *when* and *where* are setting, *what* is plot, *why* and *how* are conflict and theme. You might hear writers call this the “set-up.” This opening section *sets up* your reader to understand the context of the story. For example, a story about being left at summer camp for the first time might start with an opening that gives a sense of what kind of kid you are—independent and adventurous, or shy and reluctant. The conflict, being left at camp, will make more sense if your reader has a sense of character and context.

The set-up leads to the conflict: when the main character's struggle becomes clear. Some scriptwriters call this the “first plot point.” At this point in the plot, the conflict comes into focus.

Most writers organize their stories so the conflict is clear—or at least foreshadowed—at the beginning of a story, but the conflict is not usually directly stated in the first sentence. Again, this is a practice, not a rule, and you may find writers experimenting effectively with different structures.

Practice: Read the following openings from a few memoirs.

“You must not tell anyone,” my mother said, “what I am about to tell you.”
(Maxine Hong Kingston, *Woman Warrior*)

“I began working in journalism when I was eight years old.”
(Russell Baker, “Gumption”)

“For the rest of my days I shall be a recovering short person.” (Gary Trudeau,
“My Inner Shrimp”)

“I entered fourth grade with boldness, determination, and a strong set of lungs.”
(Student paper)

- ◆ Put these four openings in the order of their effectiveness in hooking you, making you want to read on.
- ◆ Explain why you found your number-one choice the most effective. What does the writer do to engage you?

Rising Action

After the lead and the introduction of the conflict, the hill-climbing starts—you may have heard another term for this part of the plot: “rising action,” or a series of events that aggravate the conflict. Stories can have many of these or just one or two. The point is that these events are necessary to the development of the plot; they show the logical development of the conflict as it emerges.

The conflict changes or develops over the course of the story until it reaches the climax. Another term some writers use is “the point of no return,” which is a good way to think of the

climax of the story. By this point, the character has changed in some small or big way. Something is different now, and the character can't go back to the beginning.

These developments in the plot can be charted along the story arc. Each time the character deals with a new obstacle, the conflict becomes more pronounced; the struggle changes. These changes occur incrementally, one step at a time, in order for the plot to be well paced. Having a character simply change her mind doesn't make a good story; the steps are too steep, the story unconvincing.

For example, in a story about discovering a friend in a person you never considered "friend-material," you don't come to that conclusion after having one cup of coffee together. This would seem like a shallow change. The development of this friendship should take several steps.

At one event you find yourself with Fred, a guy you thought of as snobby, but you're thrown together by being paired for a project. Fred, it turns out, has a sense of humor. Next, Fred comes through with help when you really need it: with a fund-raiser you're working on. And then Fred turns to you for help—he needs someone trustworthy to confide in. Gradually, over time, you grow closer to Fred as the curtain of his image is slowly lifted. The cumulative effect of these events is your new friendship with a person whom you never expected to call a friend. You have shown your reader the path you took to reach that conclusion, and the steps are clear and distinct.

Every single step of this incremental change over time does not have to be painstakingly recreated in your story, however. You could quickly summarize a scene or even suggest your changing perspective on Fred through a detail or an image—Fred's warm smile when you pass him on the street, for example. Just be sure that your transformation doesn't seem contrived or unbelievably sudden.

Resolution

All stories have to end. A good ending can sell the story to your reader as much as the lead can. The best endings act as resolutions without tying up every single loose end. Sometimes a well-chosen image makes a good conclusion. A piece of dialogue or an interesting observation can be effective. Whatever your choice, consider the importance of your parting words to your reader. In *Autobiography of a Face*, Lucy Grealy's tale about her struggle with her appearance—and in turn, her identity—she ends with an observation and an image:

As I sat there in the café, it suddenly occurred to me that it is no mistake when sometimes in films and literature the dead know they are dead only after being offered that most irrefutable truth: they can no longer see themselves in the mirror.

Feeling the warmth of the cup against my palm, I felt this small observation as a great revelation. I wanted to tell the man I was with about it, but he was involved in his own thoughts and I did not want to interrupt him, so instead I looked with curiosity at the window behind him, its night-silvered glass reflecting the entire café, to see if I could now, recognize myself.

Here, Grealy generalizes about being able to see yourself—your real self that "disappears" when you lose a sense of your own identity. Then, she gives her reader a specific, clear picture—herself in the café setting, looking, wondering if she can see her own reflection in the window—an ending that leaves the reader with a picture and a feeling. The story is finished, but not completely wrapped up. She is looking for her reflection, a definite improvement over the lost young girl at the beginning of the story. We don't know, however, that she sees it.

These elements make up the basic order of a story:

Lead or Set-up

Introduction of Conflict

Rising Action

Climax or Point of No Return

Resolution

Write

Narrative Voice and Dialogue

Nothing pulls a reader more quickly into a story than an engaging writer's voice. You can think about voice as the writer's personality emerging from the page. Sometimes, of course, the format may require that you mute your personal voice, that you speak for an organization or an institution, as in a company's annual report or a news story.

However, the narrative voice should sound as if there's a real human being behind it. If you accomplish that goal, a reader is more likely to tag along to find out where the story is going. If the voice in a memoir sounds bland and impersonal, your reader may not bother. After all, your reader can hear that person on the other end of almost every company's answering machine: "*Your call is important to us; please stay on the line.*"

Voice is the result of all the decisions you make as you write: whether to use long, complicated sentences or short ones, whether to use everyday words or erudite ones, whether to be playful or ironic or formal—even whether to use standard grammar or slang.

There's no set rule on what kind of voice to have in a non-fiction story. It depends on what you're trying to accomplish, what kind of story you are telling and who you are. Read the passages below.

Of course it's cold. I knew it would be cold. I would have to have known it would be cold—why wouldn't it be cold, in late December, good god of course it's cold in Chicago in late December. I had lived here for a hundred years, knew the cold. I had loved the cold, embraced and mastered the cold, had raced with Pete to the lake when it was frozen, had studied the massive icicles, ice walls, waves frozen in mid-curl. I had objected when clumsy or cruel kids would break the formations, to hear the sound, to see them fall. I had brought my Walkman down, headphones under hat, piously learning the lessons of Echo and the Bunnymen while throwing rocks across the lake's ice, watching, listening to the beedlebeedlebeedlebeddle of the rocks hopping across the dull smoked glass, extending, the ice but not the rocks, endlessly, indistinguishable from the sky, the horizon vague, like a line erased or smudged.

-David Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*-

Had not my twenty-five-year-old daughter undertipped the airline porter in Boston, our luggage might have shown up on the carousel in Allentown that April afternoon in 1980, and I would not have spent an evening walking the sidewalks of Shillington, Pennsylvania, searching for the meaning of my existence as once I had scanned those same sidewalks for lost pennies.

-John Updike, *Self-Consciousness*-

I can't say when I first noticed my blackness. Such things fall upon one like sleep, appear like gray hairs on the head. One moment we are not aware of some aspect of our being, and the next we are saying that we have never known ourselves any different. I do, however, remember the very day I noticed that my blackness made me different.

-Reginald McKnight, "Confessions of a Wannabe Negro"-

What you looking at me for?

I didn't come to stay...

I hadn't so much forgot as I couldn't bring myself to remember. Other things were more important.

What you looking at me for?

I didn't come to stay...

Whether I could remember the rest of the poem or not was immaterial. The truth of the statement was like a wadded-up handkerchief, sopping wet in my fists, and the sooner they accepted it the quicker I could let my hands open and the air would cool my palms.

What you looking at me for...

The children's section of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was wiggling and giggling over my well-known forgetfulness.

-Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*-

Look at Eggers's long, stream-of-consciousness sentences. At first they might seem loose and disorganized, but Eggers has a firm grip on all phrases and clauses. He has strung them together to create a rhythm, in part through repetition of "I had" in almost every sentence, which both echoes conversation and transcends it. We don't really talk that way, but sometimes we wish we could. The result is a voice that seems informal, even slangy, and approachable but is also descriptive and lyrical.

Contrast Eggers's voice with Updike's in the next passage. The entire passage is one long sentence, but Updike's voice is not at all conversational and slangy. On the contrary, Updike's voice is defined by his careful phrasing and clever cause-and-effect structure ("Had not" one thing happened, then this "might have" happened and "I would not have" done this as "once I had.") The result is a voice that is more distanced than Eggers's but amusing, wry, and ironic.

Similarly, you can contrast the direct, philosophical voice McKnight writes in with the poetic voice in Angelou's passage. But it would be a mistake to think that these are the only voices that Eggers, Updike, McKnight, and Angelou use. Voices vary depending on the requirements of the format, the purpose of the piece of writing, the audience you are addressing, as well as the person you are.

You should play around with voice to see what works for you and for each writing task you do. As you create a repertoire of voices, your writing becomes more versatile, and you become a more flexible and confident writer.

Practice

Read this passage, the introduction to a memoir called *Kitchen Confidential* by chef Anthony Bourdain. Bourdain's voice, as you will see, is assured, colloquial, and accessible.

A Note From the Chef

Don't get me wrong: I *love* the restaurant business. Hell, I'm still in the restaurant business—a lifetime, classically trained chef who, an hour from now, will probably be roasting bones for demi-glace and butchering beef tenderloins in a cellar prep kitchen on lower Park Avenue.

I'm not spilling my guts about everything I've seen, learned and done in my long and checkered career as dishwasher, prep drone, fry cook, grillardin, saucier, sous-chef and chef because I'm angry at the business, or because I want to horrify the dining public. I'd still *like* to be a chef, too, when this thing comes out, as this life is the only life I really know. If I need a favor at four o'clock in the morning, whether it's a quick loan, a shoulder to cry on, a sleeping pill, bail money or just someone to pick me up in a car in a bad neighborhood in the driving rain, I'm definitely *not* calling up a fellow writer. I'm calling my sous-chef, or a former sous-chef, or my saucier, someone I work with or have worked with over the last twenty-plus years.

- Do you agree that Bourdain's voice is "assured, colloquial, and accessible"? How else might you characterize it?
- What specific choices does Bourdain make that support your assessment of his voice? For example, if you agree that his voice is "assured," you might point to all the specific cookery terms he uses to create his credibility as a knowledgeable chef.

Practice

Rewrite the first paragraph of this passage in a different voice. You might choose the voice of a very formal, classically trained chef or an eccentric one. If you are familiar with a celebrity chef, like Julia Child or the Iron Chef, try to write in one of their voices.

Write a paragraph analyzing your rewrite. Identify the choices you make in vocabulary, sentence length, sentence structure, and grammar that define the different voices.

Dialogue

Writing dialogue can be challenging, especially in a memoir in which you are trying to recreate real conversations. But using dialogue does so much for your story that it is usually

worth the work. Dialogue allows the reader to hear the characters' voices, and it allows the writer to reveal characters effectively through their own language.

Your first job in writing dialogue for a memoir is to be truthful. Your reader doesn't expect you to remember exactly the words you uttered ten or five years ago or even one month ago, but your reader does expect you to recreate conversations as accurately as possible. Recreated conversations should be true to memory and in character. Readers don't believe that Tobias Wolff carried around a tape recorder during his boyhood to capture every utterance that he later wrote down in *This Boy's Life*. But they do believe that it would have been in character for his mother to say, "Oh, Toby, he's lost his brakes," and not "Oh, Toby, some idiot just missed the curve."

Your second job is to use language that the character you are presenting would actually use. Try to think about how that person speaks, any idiosyncratic speech patterns the character has, such as saying "like" a lot or using "um" as a verbal filler. If the character uses slang or profanity, and in your memory, the character used it in the situation you are writing about, then it's okay to use it. Use profanity sparingly, however, or it calls undue attention to itself.

Dialogue enhances scenes that portray conflict or emotion. Mundane scenes are better summarized than recreated, and you can understand why. There's no need for your reader to slog through boring conversations unless the point is to demonstrate boredom. If the dialogue doesn't reveal character or move the story forward, it is better left out.

A few tips on the technical aspects of writing dialogue:

- Begin a new paragraph with each new speaker.
- Put quotation marks around each speaker's words.
- Remember that periods and commas always go inside quotation marks.
- Question marks go inside quotation marks if the quotation is itself a question, ("How are you?" he asked.) but they go outside the quotation marks if the sentence around the quotation poses the question (When did you say, "I will not run for office"?). The same holds true for exclamation marks.
- Use the simple word "said" or "says" for attribution.

Practice: Write

One way to practice writing dialogue is to write down overheard conversations. Go to a public place—a café, a dining hall, a bus, a subway car, a lecture hall—and eavesdrop on a conversation. Write down as much of the conversation as you can get in ten or fifteen minutes. As soon as possible, rewrite the conversation, adding all the details you remember.

Read over the conversation and write a paragraph about what the speakers' language reveals about them. Don't pay as much attention to the content of the conversation. Focus more on issues such as who dominates the conversation, how colorful or dull their words are, how

expressive or monotonous their voices are. Looking at their language and speech patterns, what guesses can you make about their personalities?

Readings

Vacation (by Karlene Barrett)

Karlene Barrett was a student when she wrote this story, about her relationship with her mother. With no attempt at objectivity, Barrett describes her conflict with her mother's appearance.

Ever since kindergarten, the only vacation I ~~ever~~ took with my mother was our annual summer trip to San Clemente, a sweltering six-hour car ride to the Southern California coast. While vacations with my father and stepmother always promised getaways to Disneyland, fancy hotel rooms, San Francisco Giants games, speedboats on a lake, and expensive restaurant dinners, these things were, thanks to a complete lack of financial assistance from my father, non-existent luxuries in the life my sister and I had with our mother. She worked overtime to support us even in our normal, everyday lives, so this yearly trip (in which we stayed with friends, cooked our meals, and hung out at free beaches all day) was the only vacation she could afford, and my mother worked hard for it, looked forward to it with contagious excitement and prepared months in advance.

And year after year after year, I single-handedly ruined it for her.

Usually by the third or forth day, my mom was either angry or hurt, and I was always to blame. I normally guiltily defended myself with some weak protestation somewhere along the lines of: "Geez...don't be so sensitive!", or "What the hell did I do?? Soooooory...". But I always knew exactly what I did.

In San Clemente, we stayed with some friends my parents had made when they were still married, who had apparently chosen my mother's side of the battle. They had two daughters, Leigh and Kendall, who were, conveniently, more or less the same age as my sister and I. They both had tan, thin legs, and curly hair so blonde it was almost white. They looked like ^Coppertone babies. We were best friends. Mr. and Mrs.

Steffenson, as I'd been calling their parents since I learned to walk, were the storybook couple: tanned and athletic, he wore swim trunks and surfed every morning, she donned a bikini and laughed with her whole head tilted back. They were perfect. And my mom was fat. Not just middle-aged-had-two-kids-slightly-overweight. Fat. *Her* swimsuit was the same one she had worn when she had first taught me to swim: a polka dotted number with a little skirt, the kind you would see old ladies wear. *She* guffawed when she laughed, as I ducked my head, red-faced. And she *certainly* had no husband. I envied Leigh and Kendall their perfect parents. I knew they would grow to be just as perfect as the ones who bore them, wealthy, beautiful, and healthy. I had no one's shoes to fill but my mother's. And I was terrified.

"Who would want her?", I mused, knowing exactly why my father had left this graceless cow for my stepmother, a woman who, if not always an enjoyable person, at least looked like one. At the supermarket in San Clemente, I secretly prayed the cashier would think I was Mrs. Steffenson's daughter, that this woman, who ordered her clothes from thin, shiny catalogs and had a bathroom stocked full of different hues of lipsticks and expensive looking bikinis, had given birth to me, and that some day, I would grow up to look like just like her. I mean, the resemblance was uncanny, I told myself as I squeezed her hand tighter to cement the cashier's impression of my identity. This was a pattern I repeated over and over again: betraying my mother without her knowing it in favor of someone more aesthetically pleasing.

At the beach, I would sit as far away from my mother as possible, hoping no one would connect me to the huge lady with glowing white skin, a giant sun-visor, and chubby ankles. I would dart away from my mother whenever she came near me or asked

me to join her for a swim, but jump up and squeal with delight to play paddleball by the ~~river~~^{ocean} with Mrs. Steffenson. I thought I was being subtle, that my mother had no idea what was going on, but every once in a while, I had to throw off the hurt look I could see written on her face. On one particularly painful day for me (though no doubt more so for my mother), I, at thirteen, jokingly told Kendall, in my mother's presence, that "you better try your hardest not to end up like my mom." I don't know why exactly these words came out of my mouth; I know that I didn't mean them like they ended up sounding, and that I honestly believed in my heart that my mother would laugh. I can't really remember the conversation that preceded this horrible statement; my memory of that was wiped away by the memory of my mother crying in the upstairs bedroom a few minutes later.

I defended myself in my usual idiotic way, with rolled eyes and protestations that: "You didn't get it...that wasn't what I meant...Geez...". But my mother was too hurt to even listen or argue with me, and through her quiet tears, I saw that I had crossed the line and confirmed everything she thought about herself. It was the worse thing I could ever do. The worst I had ever done. It was my lowest moment. She forgave me of course; mothers always do, and we went on to have a decent rest of the vacation in which I tried my hardest not to flinch when she reached for me, to swim with her when she wanted to, and even to walk with her to the snack bar. But I suspect, though I am afraid to ask, that my mother has never forgotten that day. I wonder if she knows that I never have as well, that it haunts me as my worst, most painful memory.

My best memory, in fact, is somewhat related. It recalls an evening when I was around four when I went with my mother and father (still married) to a pizza parlor with

some of their friends. For no reason other than that I had seen it on a television show earlier in the day, as we were walking in, I wrapped my entire body around one of my mother's legs. She fell, and despite her not being hurt, I have never been yelled at, to this day, so much by my father in my entire life as I was that night. I was quickly forgiven, I'm sure, but the important part of that memory for me lies not in the fact that I was upset, or even that my mother fell, but that my father verbally and loudly defended my mother against me. There were so many years that I failed to hand her field trip permission slips for fear she would want to chaperone, warned people about her weight before they saw her so I wouldn't have to note the surprise register on their faces, and hoped people associated my birth with a different woman than she to whom the credit (or blame) really belonged. I wish my father had been there to see through me, to scream at me, to punish me for what I was doing and thinking, to remind me what an incredible and strong person my mother was, and most of all, for her to hear someone standing up for her, defending her with vehemence and rage.

Our last summer trip to San Clemente was the summer before I left for college. Leigh and I had reluctantly agreed to join my mother and Mrs. Steffenson on the beach for one day. We had some shopping to attend to in San Diego now that we could drive, but our parents and the bright sun had convinced us that we could postpone our schedule for one day. I had, over the years, joined the ranks of the teenage girls who spent beach days sunning themselves in bikinis and darting into the water only for a quick dip to cool down and wash the sweat off before changing tanning positions. I was engaging in one of these quick dips when I saw her. My mother, who loved the ocean more than anyone I'll ever know. Who still swam for hours as far out as I'd ever seen anyone go, as

trusting of the waves as I'd ever seen anyone be. floating, in her polka dot swimsuit, on the top of an unbroken wave, her feet pointed up at the sky, her arms at her sides, her eyes closed to the sun, her body responding only to the rocking motion of the sea.

Weightless. And at that moment, I saw her as I'd like to hope she saw herself, despite all those summers of my poorly-concealed embarrassment, condescension, and disdain. She was beautiful. She was awe-inspiring. She was triumphant.

I was honored.

Talking Points

1. Look at the way Barrett gets introduces you to the characters in this story. She uses concrete images as well as abstract ideas to portray them. What do you know about:
 - a. the mother—When you picture her, what do you see? What ideas do you associate with her. What kind of person is she?
 - b. Mrs. Steffenson—What do you picture when you think of Mrs. Steffenson? What does she represent—to the writer?
2. The main character of this story is the author. What kind of young girl is she in this story? Does she change over time?
3. What is the writer's attitude toward her father? How developed is he, as a character? How does the Barrett use the father, as a character, in the writing of this story?
4. Where is the turning point in the story? What does Barrett leave out of the turning point?
5. What does the last image leave you with? How much conclusion does this story have?
6. What themes can you find in this story—stated and unstated?

Writer's Notebook

Here are a few suggestions to jump-start your memoir writing.

1. Think of a family ritual—the way your family, in particular, did something: got ready for a family vacation, for example, or cooked, served, and ate a certain food. Make a list of the steps as if you were writing directions.
2. Choose a day from your life you remember well, not necessarily because it was dramatic or important but because you can recall many of the details. Write a “diary entry” as if the day were yesterday.
3. Make a list of the sounds you could hear from your bed as a child.
4. Describe the view from your bedroom window.
5. The soundtrack of your life plays which songs? When?
6. Write about yourself in the third person. Describe his or her moment of utter disappointment.
7. Think of one day you would re-live if you had the chance. Tell what happened that day as objectively as possible, without referring to how you feel about what's happening. Write in the present tense.

8. Name one day of your life when the weather was important.
9. Remember a phone call that was hard for you to make. Write the dialogue.
10. Describe someone whom you met only a few times in your childhood, someone who made a deep impression on you. Write about that person's environment and qualities of speech in the most precise language you can summon.
11. Evoke a scene in which some kind of injustice occurs. How is it resolved? What was your role in the situation?
12. Describe a moment when you came to a new insight about the adult world and its institutions, perhaps through some double standard or hypocrisy.
13. Where were you four years ago today? Describe the circumstances and setting as clearly as possible. What happened that day that you can tell now as a story?
14. Use the letter-to-a-friend technique: Write a letter to somebody you know well, explaining an event.

Peer Editing and Revision

These questions and suggestions are designed to help you rethink your memoir between your current and final drafts. If you are working with a writing partner or in a peer-editing group, the questions can serve as prompts for discussion as you workshop the reviews. These questions are also useful to ask yourself as you work on your final revision.

1. Does the story have all of the elements of drama (conflict, complications, climax, resolution)? Pay particular attention to the climax and where it occurs in the story—too early? Too Late?
2. Look at details about clothes, looks, speech, physical action. Where can some details help show the scene?
3. Might dialogue be added somewhere to show conflict and emotions?
4. Read the draft, looking for underlying themes. Are they stated or implied? Are they clear? What might make them clearer?
5. Does the tone of your memoir fit the events described? If it's a funny story, do you know that right from the first paragraph? If it's a serious story, does the tone stay consistently serious? Does the story sound like a textbook or a report anywhere?
6. Locate any "telling" places that could be "showing".
7. Look at the order of events. Might the story be reordered—or the structure changed to add drama, humor, or simply interest? Would starting at the end and flashing forward would help the drama of the story?
8. Reread the opening paragraphs. Can theses be cut? Does the opening of the story start in a scene, or with a paragraph talking about the story that follows? Start with the narrative.
9. Reread the ending. Check to see if it can end more strongly by adding an image or a piece of dialogue. See if cutting the last paragraph, especially if it tries to draw a lesson or a moral, will strengthen the ending.

Markets

After you've written your first few memoirs, the next step is to get yourself into print. You can, of course, publish in a class or college magazine—good places to get your first clips—but professional markets abound for memoir and might pay better. (Still, you might be paid in copies of the magazine. . . .) You can send your memoirs off to small magazines and special-interest publications. Be creative in fitting your story to the magazine's particular niche. If your memoir focuses on a particular ethnic or religious community (growing up African-American, Italian, Catholic, or Jewish), you might look at some of the lesser-known magazines. A great resource for the professional writer is *Writer's Market*, an annual catalog of American and Canadian publications that accept freelance work.

Under the “ethnic/minority” category, for example, *Writer's Market* lists magazines such as *African-American Heritage*, *The American Citizen Italian Press*, *The B'nai B'rith International*, *Jewish Monthly* and *American Dane*, which solicit “personal experiences” or “human interest” or “positive, informative, educational articles that build self-esteem, pride and an appreciation for the richness of culture and history.” Without too much stretching, your memoir might fall into one of those categories.

Think also about other stakeholders in your story. Is your story about alcoholism, anorexia, or another “overcoming-odds” subject? If so, health magazines might be a good market. One of the hundreds of sports magazines—*Hockey Illustrated*, *Golf Digest*, *Runner's World*, *American Skating World*, or *Wrestling World*—might be the perfect place for your sports triumph (or defeat) memoir. And don't ignore the teen and young adult markets. They often pay extremely well and are looking for unusual, personal stories that are both well written and contemporary.

Creative Non-Fiction Journal publishes essays and memoirs, writing with a strong narrative line. Some of its guidelines for submissions are strikingly similar to your assignment guidelines. A few are:

- attentiveness to language—well-written prose, rich with detail and a distinctive voice.
- an informational quality or instructive element that offers the reader something to learn (an idea, concept, or collection of facts strengthened with insight, reflection, and interpretation.)
- a compelling, focused, sustained narrative that is well structured, makes sense, and conveys meaning

(www.creativenonfiction.org)

It is worth your while to explore the markets for your writing. It's always a good idea to read any publication you're considering submitting to, so you can get a feel for the type of material published there. Getting published may not be as much of a long shot as you might think. Nothing is more satisfying—or more affirming—for a writer than to see his or her work in print.

Chapter 4

Film Reviews

"I learn more from critics who honestly criticize my pictures than from those who are devout."

-Ingmar Bergman-

Definition

You walk out of the multiplex with your friend. "What do you think?" your friend asks. You reply, "It was okay," or "I loved it," or "It was the worst movie I've ever seen." Your reply—whichever it is—gives your bottom-line opinion of the film. Once you analyze the reasons that made you respond the way you did, you have, essentially, reviewed the film.

A film review does the same work as any arts or culture review, whether it is about a recently opened restaurant, a play, an art exhibit, a new CD, or a best seller. A review is an evaluation of another's work. The evaluation consists of an opinion—good, bad, or mixed—based on your analysis of the work. To be convincing, your analysis should be bolstered by evidence to support your opinion.

There's an ethical dimension to reviewing that goes along with the job of evaluating other people's work. You should be careful to evaluate the work and not the person; in other words, you can criticize a film's predictable plot and uninspired dialogue without calling the writer a hack. In classical argumentation, the practice of attacking a person and not the person's ideas is called an *ad hominem* (literally translated from Latin as "to the man") fallacy. It is wise to avoid this trap in film reviews because it undermines your credibility as a trustworthy critic. The job of a critic or a reviewer is, after all, to analyze and evaluate an art form—even to advance the thinking about and the appreciation of the art—but not to attack the artists.

Film reviewers have yet another job—to entertain their readers. A good critic writes in a lively, engaging voice. The review itself should stand up as a good piece of writing.

The general review form, by the way, applies to many areas outside of the arts—usually minus the lively and engaging voice, however. In most work environments, managers write performance reviews of employees. Business administrators write reviews of new initiatives, judging their worth. Government granting agencies write reviews of proposals, selecting those to be awarded funding. And, of course, teachers write reviews of their students' work; every grade you receive on a paper is a type of review, an opinion supported by specific evidence.

In this chapter you will learn how to:

- evaluate the work of others
- use analysis to form your opinion
- use evidence to defend your opinion
- engage a reader with a lively voice

Collaborative Activity

From your perspective as a moviegoer, generate a list of ten things you want a film review to tell you. After you make the list, number the items in order of importance to you.

Compare your list to other groups' lists. Discuss the most common elements that appear.

Genre Considerations

Forming an Opinion

Everyone has first impressions. You see a movie—or meet a new person—and you are struck by certain characteristics that create an immediate impression. With people, you might think, “He’s an airhead,” or “She’s a science nerd.” With movies, your impressions might be, “It’s pretentiously arty,” “It’s a gushy romantic comedy,” or “It’s one of those mindless action flicks.”

As with people, once you do some deeper analysis, your first impressions may be confirmed or they may be changed. The airhead may be a creative genius or the mindless action flick may, in fact, be a serious exploration of the psychology of violent behavior.

Your opinion in a review has to be an informed opinion, which means taking steps beyond the first impression. You form that opinion by becoming more knowledgeable about the art of making films. You also form an intelligent opinion about a movie by analyzing the criteria, the individual elements of the movie that go into its making. These criteria provide the evidence to support your opinion.

The result of examining criteria and becoming informed should be forming an opinion that goes beyond “I liked/hated it.” By analyzing the film’s elements, you find evidence to defend your gut feeling. Then, rather than saying “I liked the movie but got bored,” you can say, “The acting was strong but the pace far too slow.” In this way, you have been specific as well as identified two of the criteria you will examine to support your opinion.

Practice

Think of three movies you’ve seen, one that you really liked, one that you hated, and one that you thought was so-so. For each movie, write a one-sentence statement of your opinion. Go beyond “I liked/hated it.”

Analyzing Criteria

In film reviewing, the criteria to explore are the individual elements that go into making a film, the combination of pictures and sound that tell the story. In many ways, the criteria for judging a film are similar to those for judging most narrative writing. You want to evaluate the story by looking at the characters, the plot, the conflict and the theme. (You can review these terms in Chapter 3: Memoir.)

But, film, of course, brings the story to life through techniques unique to the genre: the technical aspects of making a film. Films tell stories in images as much as in words, so to do justice to a film, you also have to respond to the visual elements: the cinematography, the editing, the acting, production design, music, and special effects.

When reviewing a film, it isn't necessary—or desirable—to catalogue every one of these elements. You have to choose the ones that apply to your film, to its specific genre, ones that support your opinion. However, a general understanding of the criteria for evaluating a film will help you understand your choices.

SIDEBAR: FILM TERMS—A GLOSSARY

1. STORY ELEMENTS

- A. Characters:** The characters are the people who inhabit the film. Characters can be divided into major characters and minor characters. The main character will go through some sort of change, or character development (**character arc**). As with any character in a narrative, expect this change to be believable and incremental. Characters need clear motivation in order to be well written. A film that has character, rather than plot, at its center is said to be **character-driven**.

A screenwriter creates a character on the page in large part through what the character says. Good **dialogue** is original, believable, and idiosyncratic. Well-drawn characters speak differently from one another and can be judged by their unique use of language or phrasing.

- B. Plot:** The plot is the story line—what actually happens in the film. As in most narratives, the plot usually revolves around a **conflict**, a clash of ideas or forces or internal tension of some kind. A good screenplay shouldn't be boring or have unexplained plot twists or meaningless scenes.

Credit or blame may go to the screenwriter for a problematic story line, or to the director for cutting between scenes too quickly, not allowing enough on-screen time to develop parts of the story.

- C. Theme:** The theme is the idea behind the film, the truth that the filmmakers are exploring or showing: perhaps a social message about the effects of oppression or perhaps an insight into a life well lived—or wasted. The theme should be subtle, integrated into the story, and not heavy-handed, obvious, and clumsy.

Of course, some movies are made for pure entertainment, to thrill you or make you laugh, and it might be fruitless to search for a theme in such films. Well-made movies, though, like well-made books, explore important themes and allow for insight along with entertainment.

2. VISUAL AND AURAL ELEMENTS

- A. **Actors:** Actors get credit for taking the basic role and dialogue and portraying them imaginatively. Don't confuse the acting—the way the lines are delivered—with the writing—the lines themselves.

When you consider the acting, think about the actor's believability. Actors should be believable in the context of the universe created in the film; it's okay for an alien to be other worldly, for example. The actors also add nuance through facial expression, vocal techniques, gesture, and movement. You can use any of these elements in a review to judge the way an actor brings the character to life.

- B. **Cinematography:** The cinematography is the way in which a movie is filmed: the shots, camera angles, and lighting. Camera angle and lighting can be used to create a particular effect; for example, a camera might be pointed down on a dimly lit character to show fright or confusion.

To judge the cinematography, you don't necessarily have to know a great deal about the technical aspects of filming. You can evaluate the results. Consider if the movie is full of "talking heads," close-ups of people conversing, or of unrelenting, dizzying motion. You can judge whether these shots are purposeful and help create a mood or add a layer of meaning. A still camera can be used to explore a character's actions and reactions. Camera movement—whether it is smooth or shaky—creates its own emotional impact, often paralleling the characters' states of mind.

- C. **Editing:** Film editing is the art of juxtaposing the individual camera shots into a coherent final product, the film itself. Editing creates the individual film sequences and the transitions from one scene to the next. Editors may cut shots together to create a jumpy mood or, alternately, use a lengthy shot to create a more natural feel.

Good editing allows the pace of the film to reflect the dramatic movement of the story. It might be worth noting in a review if quick cuts or jump cuts create an artful effect—tension perhaps—or if they simply call unnecessary attention to the editing techniques.

- D. **Production Design:** The production design includes all the physical aspects of film: the sets, costumes, locations, and props. For example, lavish period films are filled with furniture, knick-knacks, and clothing that have to be thoroughly and accurately researched in order to create an authentic "feel" to the sets. Sometimes the world of the film can become a character in itself and is worth commentary.

- E. **Soundtrack:** The soundtrack is the musical score of the film (not the pop songs that often accompany film sequences such as love scenes). As with many of the other effects, the sound should enhance the mood of the film. The "sound" of the film should place the viewer within the world of the story on an aural level. If the music is jarring or melodramatic, it can, of course, achieve the opposite of its intentions and catapult the viewer out of that world.

- F. **Special Effects:** The special effects are the animation or digital design elements or stunts that are created in the film. All effects, whether they are high or low tech, should be meaningful within the world of the film. When they call attention to themselves and bring the viewer out of the story, they often fail to achieve their purpose.

3. THE PLAYERS

If you stay to watch the credits roll at the end of a film, you know that often hundreds of people contribute to its creation. Here is a list of some of the main players and a brief description of what they do.

- A. **Producer:** pitches the project, organizes the business end, arranges locations
 - B. **Director:** oversees the shooting and the actors, determines the film's style
 - C. **Writer(s):** writes the screenplay, creates original plot and characters
 - D. **Actors:** translate the ideas to the screen, strive to create believability, depth, and appeal
 - E. **Cinematographer** (also known as **Director of Photography**): makes decisions about each shot: lighting, camera angles/movement
 - F. **Editor:** cuts the footage into finished product, creating pace and mood through juxtaposition of shots
-

Practice

Watch a video of any film with the sound turned off for five minutes. As you watch, take notes on the visual elements of the film. Pay attention to the acting, the cinematography, the editing, the production design, and any special effects you can see. Make a guess about what is happening in the film and what kind of mood is set.

Listen to the next five minutes of the same video with the picture turned off. Take notes on the aural aspects of the film: the dialogue, the soundtrack, any sound effects. Note what kind of mood is set by just the sound elements of the film.

Looking at Genre

Each time you review a film, you have to take into account the genre of the film. The genre is the category in which the film belongs. Imagine the shelves in a video store and the way the films are clustered: suspense, comedy, drama. You can further refine these categories into sub-genre: romantic comedy or historical drama.

When you are evaluating a film, it is useful to think of it as a member of a genre. Though all films need to be entertaining, the genre of a film determines what the audience will expect and how it will be judged. For example, special effects are more significant criteria for judging the overall merit of a horror film than they are in evaluating a romantic comedy. The criteria you choose for your review help make a case for your impression, but you have to be careful to use criteria that are appropriate for the genre.

Thinking about genre helps you make a clear case for finding merit as well as flaws in your film. Once you recognize the genre or sub-genre of your film, you can think about the conventions of that genre.

Conventions are the traditional ways of presenting a film genre. In the typical western, for example, we know that when the guy in the black hat rides into town, trouble is brewing. In a horror film, the high-pitched violin music or the shot up a darkened stairway foreshadows a terrifying scene.

Once those expectations are set up—through repetition, over time—filmmakers can play with the conventions. They can adhere to them or subvert them. Sometimes films mix genre, putting together an interesting stew of comedy and gangster conventions, as Quentin Tarantino did in his 1994 film “Pulp Fiction.” In Tarantino’s earlier film “Reservoir Dogs,” one convention-defying sequence has happy music playing over a horrific scene of mutilation and murder.

Sometimes single images from films are so familiar to us that they become conventions. Think of the shower murder scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s “Psycho,” in which the audience sees the shadow of the hand holding a knife, the shower curtain acting as scrim. Images like this one eventually may become clichés and are often referred to satirically in other films. Reviewers never praise clichés, but sometimes the references to previous films adds to the meaning of a film.

Thinking about genre, and audience expectations concerning genre will help you put the film you are reviewing in a context and generate good reasons to back up your positive or negative evaluation.

Looking at Context

There are other ways to place a film in categories, or in context, other shelves in the video store where you might find the film. You can compare a film to others by the same director or writer. You can compare the film to others in which the leading actor has appeared. If the film is based on a novel or play, it would be interesting to compare it to its original source, to comment on whether it stands on its own as a work of art or even surpasses its source.

Some filmmakers are strongly influenced by earlier films and “borrow” shots or scenes or even characters and dialogue from their predecessors. The HBO award-winning television series “The Sopranos,” for example, borrows generously—and ironically—from Francis Ford Coppola’s classic film “The Godfather.” If you are aware of some influences, adding them to your review gives your reader interesting background information. However, as a film reviewer, and not a film critic or historian, unless these influences are apparent, you don’t have to hunt them down.

Practice

Go to the Internet Movie Database at IMDb.com. Spend some time exploring this site. Write a list of the information you can find at this site that would help a reviewer find background and context information for a particular film.

Assignment

Write a film review of a movie in current release—or of a movie you can watch on tape or DVD. In either case, choose a movie that has some artistic merit, that goes beyond pure entertainment.

Choose a specific publication in which you would publish this review: a newspaper, magazine, or online site, and keep this audience in mind as you write the review.

Your research should include reading reviews in your chosen publication as well as finding out what you can about the context and sources—if any—of the film.

It is best not to read other reviews of the film you've chosen since they will inevitably influence your opinion.

Warm-up Exercise

Think of the most recent movie you've seen. Write a one-sentence reply to the question "How was it?" stating your bottom-line judgment.

Isolate three film elements that you can use as evidence to back up your evaluation. For example, "The movie bored me because the acting was wooden, the script full of clichés, and the music monotonous."

Write a mini-review of the movie, using only these criteria. Include a supporting example for each criterion.

Collect

Watching a Film

Clearly, the first step in researching a film review is to see the film. Critics are divided in their opinions about the value of watching a film on the big screen versus watching it on a television set.

Some reviewers feel it is far better to watch a film in a theater. They argue that going to the cinema is a different experience from watching a film on your own or even with friends. Part of the allure of the cinema, and its effect, is the collective response of the audience. As a spectator, you share in the group's response to the movie, whether one guy laughs inappropriately and sets off a group response or someone else's gasp of horror sends chills up your spine.

Many in the film business would argue also that the effect of seeing a film on its intended scale, with the imagery and sound in their full glory, far surpasses the experience of watching a film reduced on a television screen.

On the other hand, reviewers often do have access to advance videos and DVDs. Many find that watching movies on their own schedules, free from the distraction of others, allows them to be more alert and watch more attentively.

Of course, the main advantage to watching a film on your television is that you're in control. You can stop, rewind, and watch the film or selected scenes many times. You can also more easily extract snippets of dialogue to use for supporting evidence. DVDs give you access to outtakes, director's comments, and other contextual

information you can include in your analysis. This more leisurely viewing allows for a more meditative, if less spontaneous, response to a film.

Taking Notes

If you decide to go to a movie theater, taking notes in a darkened theater will take some skill. Even a small flashlight distracts other viewers, and you might get pelted with popcorn if you try to use one. It's best to bring a notebook, write brief notes to yourself in large, legible handwriting, and sit down immediately after the film to fill in the blanks.

You will remember the basic plot, of course, and you can always get the names of the actors and filmmakers from the ads or from the movie's Web site. It is best to take notes on your responses and your insights about the film elements. If there's a memorable piece of dialogue, write it down. If the music moves you to tears—or distraction—note it. Use the notepad to remind yourself of your experience viewing the film, to prompt deeper analysis, but not to write down facts that you can find later.

Some reviewers like to watch a movie twice, the first time to respond purely to the film experience and the second time to take notes and be more analytical. Renting, of course, makes this an easier—and less expensive—process. In either case, you should take good notes during the movie and write them up, adding details and examples immediately afterwards.

Researching Background Information

You can find information about the making of the movie from a number of sources. The movie's Web site is, of course, an easy place to start, but be aware that this is a biased source of information. The Web site is built by the film's promotion department, and its focus is to sell the movie. It's a good place to get information about the cast and details about the production, however.

Of all the movie databases on the 'net, perhaps the most comprehensive and most objective is the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com). At this writing, IMDb.com is owned by amazon.com and is a free site. It catalogues a great deal of information about current movies, including biographies of the filmmakers and the cast, movie trivia, information about the locations, and relevant anecdotes about the making of the movie. It's fun and useful to find out this information before you write your review, even if not all of it will make its way into your writing.

More serious and scholarly sources are film encyclopedias and general histories that you can find in a good college library. One of the best is David Cook's *History of Narrative Film*, which also has a detailed glossary of film terms for those who want to explore this field in more depth. Another excellent resource is Gerald Mast and Bruce Kavin's *A Short History of the Movies*.

You should use context and background information sparingly in your review, however. You don't want to or need to include every single detail about the film in your review. Sometimes the information is more important to have for your own understanding of the movie than to include it in your review. After all, the review is about your evaluation of the movie, not your comprehensive knowledge about it.

Yet when something important or interesting occurs with the making or distribution of a film, do include it if it helps make your points. For example, the movie "O," released in 2001, updates Shakespeare's classic tragedy "Othello" by setting the story in a modern high school. Certainly that background information needs to be briefly mentioned in a review. However, even more interesting was the fact that the movie was set for release in 1999 but was held for two years because of real violence that beset American high schools during that period. Here's how Mark Caro of the *Chicago Tribune* begins his review of "O."

Setting a Shakespearean tragedy in an American high school doesn't seem like too much of a stretch given the very real tragedies that had occurred at schools in West Paducah, Ky.; Jonesboro, Ark.; and Springfield, Ore., before Tim Blake Nelson even began to film "O," a loose reworking of "Othello."

Yet the April 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., and the ensuing presidential-campaign uproar over violence in entertainment led a squeamish Miramax to shelve the finished movie for almost two years; the distributor sold it to Lions Gate Films this spring after the producers filed a breach-of-contract lawsuit.

Caro found this information important enough to lead with it, in part, one would think, because he uses this information in the next paragraph to set up his evaluation, that the timeless nature of the story contributes to the film's success. He writes,

Now "O" finally has arrived...the story has lost none of its potency.

And that's how it should be. Shakespeare's works, after all, have endured for four centuries, so if a movie like "O" didn't have a shelf life of more than two years, it couldn't be a very serious work. And Nelson is deadly serious.

Another reviewer, Jay Carr of the *Boston Globe*, didn't like the film as much as Caro did. He doesn't use the production details at all in his lead, but he does give the information about the movie's source.

Talented young performers and a venturesome director throw themselves at Shakespeare's "Othello" with vigor, freshness, and conviction in "O," but can carry this modernization only so far. The film collapses under the weight of the effort to shoehorn Shakespeare's story into a context that ultimately doesn't accommodate it.

Carr waits until his conclusion to add the details about the production. Instead of using the production story as a segue into his evaluation, as Caro does, Carr downplays its importance and tosses the information quickly into his wrap-up.

Unfortunately, Miramax, the film's original distributor, dropped "O" in 1999 because the Shakespearean pileup of bodies at the end would not have played well against the real-life Columbine High

School massacre. A different distributor, Lion's Gate, picked it up. "O" breaks down after a while, but it's a nice try, and deserves the chance to be seen.

As you can see, what background and contextual information you use, where you insert it, and even how much of it you use should be done not in isolation but in service of your points, your evaluation of the film.

Practice: Read this third review of "O" written by Elvis Mitchell of the *New York Times*.

The Moor Shoots Hoops

Elvis Mitchell

August 31, 2001

"But wherefore do not you a mightier way/ Make war upon this bloody tyrant, Time?" So Shakespeare starts his Sonnet XVI. The distributors of "O" sought to defeat Time by simply waiting for a media storm to dissipate. Not much of a stratagem, since "O," the director Tim Blake Nelson's updating of "Othello" set in an American prep school, was made so long ago that Mekhi Phifer could still get away with playing a teenager—well, almost. Filming was completed in 1999, the same year as the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado, and the picture made Miramax, the distributing company, nervous because it feared the gun violence in "O" might incite copycat gunplay.

Lions Gate is finally bringing the film to theaters. Mr. Phifer has the title role in Brad Kaaya's adaptation. In trying to make "Othello" more lifelike and bring it down to a younger audience—in effect, to make it more democratic—the adaptation has rendered the material artless. And "O" has been beaten to the punch by so many other movies that the picture feels utterly superfluous.

The title character has been christened Odin, or O, a black basketball star and an athletic scholarship recruit to an all-white private high school. A shot-caller from the floor, O is a decent guy whose status on the team provokes jealousy in the Iago figure, Hugo (Josh Hartnett), who schemes to do O in by any means necessary. That includes preying upon the stir caused by O's romantic pursuit of a white girl, Desi (Julia Stiles). "White girls are snakes, bro," Hugo whispers to Odin.

Film versions of "Othello" have provoked more than their share of controversy. The plot's racial and sexual overtones still produced an emotional boil in 1995; when the trailer for Oliver Parker's version ran before a showing of "Waiting to Exhale" at the Magic Johnson Theater in Los Angeles, I heard a black woman gasp, "I know Larry Fishburne's not about to kiss a white woman." The real shame was that even by 1995, only a few black actors had been filmed playing Shakespeare's Moor, with Mr. Fishburne one of the few to portray him in a classical movie adaptation.

Moving "Othello" to a basketball court certainly sounds more interesting than shifting "The Taming of the Shrew" to a Los Angeles-area high school, as did the makers of "10 Things I Hate About You," which also featured Ms. Stiles.

The idea of Shakespeare's mythic black man as an intimidator on the backboards makes sense. Even though many private school teams now have African-American players, such an idea is an ingenious way of making Othello's physical authority, and everyone's reaction to it, part of the drama. Some of Odin's thunder was stolen when "Finding Forrester"—which used the motif of the inner city African-American youth playing hoops at a private school as a subplot—preceeded Mr. Nelson's film to the multiplexes.

Still, the concept of Othello's lording it over the guards in front of cheering crowds sounded workable. The film strains to comment on race in the way that kids can pretend to be guileless and still draw blood. (Probably the last black athlete to possess the knowing grimace of danger in a way that embodied Othello was Sonny Liston. In that drama, though, Muhammad Ali was a combination of Iago and Hotspur from "Henry IV, Part I.")

I hoped Mr. Kaaya would use as his catalyst the outraged remarks that Isaiah Thomas made during the N.B.A. playoffs in 1988—that black players were still thought of as instinctive while white players like Larry Bird were considered smart. Perhaps this might be a way of getting at what Kenneth Tynan once described as Othello's "concealing within him racks on which to stretch himself and those about him until the excruciated lyric cry was released; and bearing in his baggage explosive coils of taut, dangerous springs."

This colloquial adaptation has been deprived of any such texture; all the conflicts have been laid out in fairly simple terms, as if the writer was in a hurry to get to the point before the butterlike topping on the audience's popcorn congealed. The story has been shaved down so that exhibitors can fit in as many showings as possible, and one of the most important things missing from "O" is subtext. After a languorous first 40 minutes that gives time to nothing except Hugo's fixation on hawks, the picture vaults into a violent climax.

Mr. Phifer is a quick young actor but lacks the presence to dominate the screen in the way the role requires; though as an athlete he looms large, he's oblivious to his effect. (Mr. Phifer is much smaller than the high schoolers who become hoops stars nowadays; he'd be like Muggsy Bogues compared to these hormonal giants.)

Mr. Phifer seems humbled by the part—the wrong pivot, since "Othello" is about a proud man being humbled, and it was this heavyweight persona that probably affronted and roused the audiences of Shakespeare's erra seeing the play for the first time. (Pro athletes are now celebrated for Othello-size bravado, even though

Allen Iverson, with his quicksilver shifts of mood, seems to be playing our a variation of Othello these days.)

Odin gets to make a few forceful dunks to display his athleticism, but by that time he's so addled by Iago's influence, which includes cocaine, that the movie has long since stopped making any dramatic sense. The smaller scenes, when the tribal rites of the teenagers are examined, have a life of their own. But these moments aren't epic or particularly Shakespearean. As good as the romantic clinches between Mr. Phifer and Ms. Stiles are, audiences sitting through them may feel they've already seen the actress in something with low-wattage racial tension before, namely "Save the Last Dance."

One of the biggest problems with "O" is that its volatility has been erased. Hugo's Iago motivation is that he feels he has been displaced by Odin in his own home. His cold, withdrawn father (Martin Sheen), who is also the team's coach, treats O like a son. When Odin receives the M.V.P. award, Hugo is consumed with rage, though it is never clear if he was unjustly ignored or if he is deluded about his place on the team. Either scenario would provide more dramatic motivation than eliding the point, which is what "O" does.

And we wait for the movie to deal with the way hip-hop culture has been utterly absorbed into the lives of middle-class white kids, but "O" doesn't touch on that, either.

The low-key instincts that served Mr. Nelson so well in his 1997 directorial debut, the chilling "Eyes of God," help in setting a moody, anxious tone. As a director, Mr. Nelson is attracted to provocative material: the unsettling "Eye of God," about a brutal murder in the Oklahoma Bible belt, raises goose flesh that it takes weeks to lose.

"O" apparently drew him for similar reasons, but watching this picture is like arriving at a volcano a few weeks after an eruption. An adaptation of "Othello" should be a series of rumbles building up to the big conflagration. The damage here is measly by comparison.

Talking Points

1. Where does Mitchell insert the background information about the delay in production?
2. What is Mitchell's evaluation of "O"? How does he use the background information to serve this evaluation?
3. Where else in the review does Mitchell insert contextual or background information?
4. Explain whether you find that the contextual and background information advances your understanding of the film or distracts you? Would you like to know more, or are there places you would cut?

Select

As with all your assignments, you really can't begin writing until you have found your focus. In a film review, the focus is stated as a **thesis**, the point you are prepared to argue and to support through your analysis. You should take a stand in your thesis and clearly state your evaluation of the film. Every detail, even the background and context as you've just seen, should be chosen to advance this thesis.

Your reader should know your thesis quickly—if not in the first paragraph, then soon after. Mitchell states his thesis in his review of "O" in his second paragraph. He writes "...the adaptation has rendered the material artless," and then "...the picture feels utterly superfluous." Carr's thesis on the same film is the last line of his lead paragraph: "The film collapses under the weight of the effort to shoehorn Shakespeare's story into a context that ultimately doesn't accommodate it."

As you can see, a good thesis doesn't just state whether or not you like a film but sets forth a more specific argument; for example, Mitchell's negative take on the movie is clearly stated in his thesis. The reader expects that he will prove this thesis, that he will provide specific evidence of the "artless material" and "superfluous" nature of the picture.

Order

The film review's structure is not set in stone, but most reviewers cover the same basic elements:

- introduction
- thesis that presents the evaluation
- background and contextual information
- brief plot summary
- analysis of the most significant criteria
- specific evidence to support the analysis

Introduction

The purpose of the introduction in a review is the same as in any piece of writing: to hook the reader and to establish your credibility as a writer who has something interesting and important to say. Your reader should know, by the end of the first few paragraphs, how you feel about the film, whether you're pro, con, or ambivalent.

Many reviewers provide context in their introductions in order to get the reader into the world of the film. A good way to begin is to present what is most remarkable or notable about the making of the film. Perhaps the most interesting figures are not the actors but the writer or the director. Perhaps the film's path to production is unusual, as in the story of the release of "O" discussed earlier. If the movie was adapted from a book—or from Shakespeare—or is a remake of an earlier film, you can note that information in your introduction.

There is no one way to write an introduction for a film review, but some time-honored choices are

- relating notable facts about the cast, crew, background of story or making of the film
- putting the film in its genre (action, horror, romantic comedy, etc.)
- providing a brief plot summary
- recreating a scene from the play or quoting interesting dialogue

No matter how you choose to introduce your review, however, be sure to include your general evaluation.

Acclaimed play writer turned screenwriter David Mamet wrote and directed "Heist," a crime caper starring Gene Hackman, Danny DeVito, Rebecca Pidgeon, and Delroy Lindo. "Heist" was released in 2001 to generally good reviews. Read the following introductory paragraphs to four reviews of the film.

Here's how Mick LaSalle, movie critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, began his review:

Even a mediocre David Mamet movie is still a David Mamet movie. That means there are lines to savor, partly because the lines are so good, partly because they are so Mamet. Take this one from "Heist," spoken by Danny DeVito in full DeVito-like exasperation: "Everybody needs money! That's why they call it money!"

Stephen Hunter writing in the *Washington Post* :

You know that thing he does? You know. The thing. He does a thing where, what I'm saying is it's a thing, a thing. Everybody talks in such a rhythm it's so real but then it's also not real, it sort of sings and dances and you're thinking, what the hell... That's what he does. And what I'm saying is he's done that thing again. That thing.

This time the thing that David Mamet has done is called "Heist." A typical product that will excite those who love his dialogue-dense, vernacular-vivid style, and irritate those who hate it. For the believers at least, it's quite a thing: games within games,

stratagems within stratagems, gambits within gambits, twists within twists, words within words. Imagine a pretzel baked jointly by Samuel Beckett and George V. Higgins, really salty and twisty.

A. O. Scott, in his review of “Heist” for the *New York Times*, begins this way:

In “Heist” David Mamet applies himself to a creaky subgenre: the last-big-score picture, in which an aging master thief is paired with a cocky, not entirely reliable youngster. The formula has been worked over so many times in the past—so many times this year, for that matter—that even as shrewd an operator as Mr. Mamet may not have much to add. This director, whose film-making career has been a series of self-subverting genre exercises, plays it straight this time, and what “Heist” lacks in novelty it makes up for in solid entertainment.

Roger Ebert, writing about “Heist” in the *Chicago Sun-Times* starts his review this way:

David Mamet’s “Heist” is about a caper and a con, involving professional criminals who want to retire but can’t. It’s not that they actually require more money. It’s more that it would be a sin to leave it in civilian hands. Gene Hackman plays a jewel thief who dreams of taking his last haul and sailing into the sunset with his young wife (Rebecca Pidgeon). Danny DeVito is the low-rent mastermind who forces him into pulling one last job. Hackman complains he doesn’t need any more money.

DeVito’s wounded reply is one of the funniest lines

Mamet has ever written: “Everybody needs money! That’s why they call it money!”

Talking Points

1. Identify the technique(s) each writer uses to begin his review.
2. What information is included in all the introductory paragraphs?
3. Identify the reviewer’s opinion in each review. Do any paragraphs neither imply nor state the reviewer’s opinion?
4. In *your* opinion, which review does the best job of hooking the reader? Why?

Practice

Choose a movie you have seen recently. Use the same technique as any one of these reviewers and write an introduction for that movie.

Write a sentence or two explaining the technique you used.

Plot summary

Somewhere in your review—usually near the beginning—you should give a brief overview of the film’s plot. A plot summary, just like a summary on a book jacket or the summary on the first page of your phone bill, hits the highlights but leaves out the details. A summary should be both specific and concise.

Here’s where it is especially important to think of your reader. A reader turns to a review to find out essentially what the movie is about and whether it’s worth the money to go see it. But the reader doesn’t want to know every detail of the story and every twist of the plot. You have to be careful not to give away any surprises, not to ruin the reader’s pleasure of watching the story unfold in the film.

Here, for example, is the plot summary from Janet Maslin’s *New York Times* review of the 1991 film “Thelma and Louise.”

“I don’t remember ever feeling this awake!” exclaims one of the two freewheeling runaways of Ridley Scott’s hugely appealing new road movie, as they race ecstatically across the American Southwest. Funny, sexy and quick-witted, these two desperadoes have fled the monotony of their old lives and are making up new ones on a minute-by-minute basis. Their adventures, while tinged with the fatalism that attends any crime spree, have the thrilling, life-affirming energy for which the best road movies are remembered. This time there’s a difference: This story’s daring anti-heroes are beautiful, interesting women.

Maslin’s plot summary, which is also the review’s first paragraph, gives an overall sense of the plot without giving away a thing about the surprises or twists in the story. She doesn’t give details about the “crime spree” nor does she give away the shocking ending (nor will we), which galvanized audiences when the film was initially released. Those details are best left for the viewers to discover while watching the film. (You can read the full text of Maslin’s review in the readings at the end of the chapter.)

Remember that a review is not a retelling of the story but an analysis of the film as a whole. Plot, or story, is only one element in the analysis—and one small part of your review. Your aim should be to give the reader a sense of what the story is about, adding as many plot details as necessary to give context to your points about other elements—the acting or the cinematography, for example.

Surprisingly good plot summaries often appear on the back of video boxes or in capsule reviews. For example, the summary of “Heist” on the Internet Movie Database Web site reads, “The title pretty much covers it. Hackman plays the old pro forced into one last job by his fence (DeVito).” The summary for “Lord of the Rings,” released in the winter of 2001, reads “In a small village in the Shire a young Hobbit named Frodo has been entrusted with an ancient Ring. Now he must embark on an Epic quest to the Cracks of Doom in order to destroy it.” While neither of these one-sentence summaries go into detail, both give the reader the film’s main premise, which provides a reasonable overview of the story

Practice

- Write a list of movies that most people in the class have seen. Choose a movie on that list that you've seen and summarize the plot in one sentence.
- Read your summary aloud and see if others can identify the movie. Compare your summary sentence to others' summaries of the same movie. Which story highlights appear in all the summaries?

Analysis

An analysis is an examination of the elements that go into the creation of a work. In the analytical section of a film review, which is usually most of the main middle section, you prove your thesis by selecting those elements—the story, characters, direction, music, editing, cinematography, acting, costumes, special effects—that support your overall evaluation of the film's strengths and weaknesses.

You don't have to look at all the elements, of course. That kind of exhaustive analysis would tire both you and your reader and is outside the scope of a film review. Your task is to be selective, to choose the criteria that provide the best evidence to support your thesis.

It is good practice to look at some criteria that can be praised and some that can be criticized. You enhance your credibility and show your critical acumen if you can discern what works well and what doesn't. If you can point out an excellent actor in an otherwise lackluster cast or a dud of a speech in an otherwise brilliantly written script, your reader will be more likely to trust that your judgment is thoughtful and not necessarily swayed by your overall opinion of the film.

You can see how reviewers analyze selected film criteria in the following excerpts. Pay attention to how the reviewers' opinions of the films' overall worth are telegraphed in many of their comments.

Acting

There has probably been no piece of casting this year more ineffably Hollywood than Cher as a busy, weary public defender in Peter Yates "Suspect"—Cher as a dedicated drudge. Cher being Cher, when she represents a man accused of murder, in a Washington, D. C., courtroom, before a rigid, cold-eyed judge, she wears a black leather jacket, and her long thick hair is loose on her shoulders. She's all wrong for this public defender: her hooded, introspective face doesn't give you enough—she needs a role that lets her use her body. With the camera on her steadily here, you might be watching a still picture.—Pauline Kael, *The New Yorker* (1987)

Cher is right at home in the screwball ethnic comedy "Moonstruck." She doesn't stare at the camera and act the goddess. She moves around, she shouts, and when she lets her hair down a huge dark mass of crinkly tendrils floats about her tiny face. (What a prop!) Cher isn't afraid to be a little crazy

here, and she's devastatingly funny and sinuous and beautiful.—Pauline Kael, *The New Yorker* (1988)

Writing

[In "The Spanish Prisoner"] Mamet demands that actors recite his words with distancing rhythms and cadences that make the conversations sound as if they took place on an alternative universe that parallels but does not connect to our own. This alienating verbal style puts peculiar emphasis on phrases like "You're a real gent" and "I'm loyal and true and I'm not hard to look at," emphasizing the artificiality of the situations and making any kind of involvement with the characters hard to imagine.—Kenneth Turan, *Los Angeles Times*

Theme

The point of this 157-minute picture ["Eyes Wide Shut"] seems clear. Every married person has within himself or herself a secret cosmos of sexual imaginings, longings, fantasies and perhaps extramarital actions. The actual marital life of a husband and wife involves only a portion of the sexual cosmos of each.—Stanley Kaufmann, *The New Republic*

Cinematography

Steven Soderbergh's great, despairing squall of a film, "Traffic" may be the first Hollywood movie since Robert Altman's "Nashville" to infuse epic cinematic form with jittery new rhythms and a fresh, acid-washed palette. The agitated pulse of the hand-held camerawork (by the director working under a pseudonym) that roughly elbows its way into the center of the action is perfectly suited to the film's hard-boiled subject, America's losing war on drugs. The color scheme sandwiches a few lush patches between sequences filmed in two hues—an icy blue and sun-baked yellow-orange—that are as visually discordant as the forces doing battle.—Stephen Holden, *New York Times*

Editing

[The drug] sequences are done in fast-motion, to show how quickly the drugs take effect—and how disappointingly soon they fade. The in-between times edge toward desperation. [Director Darren] Aronofsky cuts between the mother, a prisoner of her apartment and diet pills, and the other three [characters]. Early in the film ["Requiem for a Dream"]...he uses a split screen in which the space on both sides is available to the other (Sara and Harry each have half the screen, but their movements enter into each other's halves). This is an effective way of showing them alone together. Later, in a virtuoso closing sequence, he cuts between all four major characters as they careen toward their final destinations.—Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*

Production Design

The genuine magic in "Episode I" ["Star Wars: Episode I, The Phantom Menace"] is all in its design. Conceptual artist Doug Chiang and production designer Gavin Bocquet give us breathtaking vistas, fabulous imaginary cities that range from the Florentine splendor of Queen Amidala's domain to the teeming metropolis of Coruscant. The vaultlike Galactic

Senate, whose box seats float through the air, is a triumph of baroque futurism. The sunset-drenched, open-air Jedi council chambers (shades of “Blade Runner”) glow like a remembered childhood picture book. (The art nouveau, glass-bubble undersea city, however, looks like a floating Lamps Plus showroom to me.) The massive, tree-crunching tanks of the droid armies have a brutal beauty; there’s visual wit in the insectlike robot soldiers who do the Trade Federation’s dirty work. Indeed, there’s often so much to take in you wish Lucas would hold his shots longer, and let us feast on the details.—David Ansen, *Newsweek*

Soundtrack

Slowly, however, the communal oddity of the new picture [“The Royal Tenenbaums”] began to hit home. For some reason, I caught it first in the soundtrack, notably in the sharp sprinkling of Ravel that Anderson throws over his chosen people—a pizzicato passage from the String Quartet which tightens our sense of the Tenenbaums as unpredictable toys, either running down or whizzing out of control. —Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*

Sound Effects

From the first, rhythmic, exquisitely separated sound of a chopper going chtt-chtt-chtt, which suggests both an eerily dry laugh and hoarse admonition, to the heartbeat-thumping of a single bass that marks the film’s arrival at the mysterious locus of pure, horrifying evil, you know you are in the presence of a master—and a masterpiece—with “Apocalypse Now Redux.”—Susan Stark, *Detroit News*

Special Effects

It’s a heady and delirious brew, too. The action [of “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon”] is dexterously produced, thanks to the martial choreography of Mr. Yuen, best known to American audiences for the high-flying flights of “The Matrix.” The action in “The Matrix” was put together with a process called Bullettime, and here it should be termed Ballettime, as the performers soar gracefully over rooftops and up the sides of buildings as softly as leaves dancing in the air on an autumn day. Mr. Lee has found a way to make even the action feel poetic and spiritual, while sparked by a high adrenaline content.—Elvis Mitchell, *The New York Times*

Conclusion

Wrap up your film review quickly. A review is too short and too compact to need a summary conclusion. Many reviewers end with a clever or witty line or two that reprise the main point(s) in the analysis and give the bottom-line evaluation of the film. For example, Mitchell ends his review of “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon”—which is excerpted above—by referring to the special effects and reiterating his praise for the film. He writes, “ “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” glides through the trees like its characters; it’s an epic that breaks the laws of gravity.”

Conclusions are as individualistic as introductions, though, and so you can be as creative as you wish, as long as you leave your reader with a clear sense of your opinion of the film. Here are a few more conclusions from the films excerpted above:

“Suspect” by Pauline Kael

If the moviemakers had just pushed the Quaid character a little further—if he had wanted to help her but wanted to show her up, too—they might have had the hair trigger for a thriller... Probably these fellows were just so proud of not having made the woman a bimbo that they didn’t notice they’d made her a lummox.

“”Star Wars: Episode I, The Phantom Menace” by David Ansen

... But you can’t go home again. Lucas’s sensibility, which was never particularly sophisticated to begin with, hasn’t evolved in two decades. “The Phantom Menace” is more of the same, without the innocence and without the juice. And in the year of “The Matrix,” which offers a new style of special effects and a dystopian fantasy that hits closer to home, Lucas’s childlike vision is beginning to look merely childish.

Practice

Choose a movie you have seen recently. Use the same technique as any one of these reviewers and write a conclusion for that movie.

Write a sentence or two explaining the technique you used.

Write

Voice

Earlier we described voice as the writer’s personality emerging from the page and reminded you that voice is the result of all the decisions you make as you write: whether to use long, complicated sentences or short ones, whether to use everyday words or erudite ones, whether to be playful or ironic or formal—even whether to use standard grammar or slang.

You want to write your film review with a lively and entertaining voice, a voice that reveals the intelligence and insight you bring to your analysis. Pauline Kael, the film reviewer for *The New Yorker* magazine for 25 years, was famous for her strong opinions and equally strong voice. In the introduction to her book *For Keeps*, she explains the evolution of her voice this way: “I had written about movies for almost fifteen years, trying to be true to the spirit of what I loved about movies, trying to develop a voice that would avoid saphead objectivity and let the reader in on what sort of person was responding to the world in this particular way.”

Her aim was to write in a way that sounded like spoken language, that avoided the sound of “...a genteel, fuddy-duddy stylist who says, ‘One assumes that...’”

While trying to connect with your reader and reveal the person you are, you can still vary your voice, tailoring it to the kind of film you are reviewing. A serious drama requires serious treatment—perhaps a more formal and philosophical voice than a teen comedy that would best be reviewed in a voice filled with wit and humor.

Choosing the right voice for a review can be tricky. It’s always fun to be irreverent, to skewer a bad film with wit and irony, but you have to be careful not to go overboard, to sound silly or, conversely, mean-spirited. Similarly, it is often easiest to write in a serious—even reverent—voice about a film you love, but if your voice is overly earnest, your reader may find the review dull and lose interest.

Audience

You also have to consider—as always—your audience. If you’re writing for a local newspaper, you have to assume that the readers may not know a lot nor care a lot about film terminology. They want to read a clear review that is usually star-oriented but also specific and well written; however, they don’t expect a comprehensive analysis of film technique as readers of film magazines like *Premiere*, *Cineaste*, or *Film Quarterly* might. These film journals are often written in a serious, academic voice.

Most of the reviews already included as models in this chapter fall in the middle ground. Newspapers and magazines like the *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Sun-Times* are considered cultural outlets, where the readers look for reviews that are written with a lively voice, wit, and intelligence.

Online movie reviews are fun to read—and fun to write—but often lack an analytic component. Many online critics are movie fans who log on to hype a film they love or pan one they hate, but not many support their views with the kind of analysis discussed here—though there are always exceptions.

Practice

In 1997 “*Fargo*,” an offbeat film written and directed by Ethan and Joel Coen won the best picture of the year from the New York Film Critics Circle. Joel Coen won the best director award in the Cannes Film Festival, and the Academy Awards bestowed the best actress Oscar to Frances McDormand and best screenplay to the Coen brothers for “*Fargo*.” Below are three excerpts from reviews of this film. As you read them, think about which reviews you think is the best and which you would consult to decide whether or not to see a film.

Here are the opening paragraphs of a review of "Fargo" from *Cineaste*, a magazine targeted to a knowledgeable and sophisticated film viewer.

CINEASTE, Vol. XXII, no. 2, 1996, p. 47, Thomas Doherty

White-out conditions bracket the outskirts of Fargo, a warmhearted tale of cold-blooded murder from the brothers Coen, director Joel and producer Ethan. The opening shot sketches the color scheme: barely discernible through overcast skies and blowing snow, a lone vehicle tows a tan Cutlass Ciera along a God-forsaken strip of highway, a tableau echoed at the end of the film when another car carries its cargo, a sullen murderer, to justice. Front, back, and in between, snow is the dominant visual motif, subzero temperatures the environment wraparound, a blizzard of white stuff that layers the landscape and fills the frames of pre-cable television screens. Fargo mixes a *film noir* ethos with *film blanc* visuals.

Set in rural Minnesota in the dead of winter (the place name "Fargo" is the least of the calculated misdirections), when the Siberian express comes sweeping down from Canada, gathering velocity and ferocity, to settle in with bone-numbing, mind-twisting cold, the film luxuriates in seasonal and regional atmosphere. Though a goodly chunk of the nation regularly withstands such polar conditions, the culture of life-threatening winter is seldom glimpsed in American film, perhaps because the rituals of scraping ice off the windshield, praying for the ignition to turn over, wearing headgear for protection (not style), and fur as a survival (not fashion) statements are alien to sun-drenched Hollywood honchos who can wait all day for the light but run like rabbits from frozen precipitation. Given the oppressive force of the elements and the blank existential horizon, it's no surprise that the harsh, protracted weather engenders murderous impulses in borderline personality types, or that monochromatic vistas and cabin fever push rugged individuals over the edge into dementia with alarming regularity. It's the terrain of Wisconsin death trips and home turf to Ed Gein, the original serial killer, and father to screen psychos from Norman Bates to Hannibal Lector.

Here is a short review of "Fargo," from *Time*, a general circulation magazine.

TIME, 3/18/96, p. 91, Richard Corliss

A few years back, Howard Mohr of *A Prairie Home Companion* wrote a book called *How to Talk Minnesotan*. Was it funny? Hey, you betcha. So are the twistings of that frosty, flabbergastingly flat accent as heard on the Minnesota-based *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Two other gifted natives, the filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen, have apparently never got over the giggle value of their regional dialect. *Fargo*, their derisive new true-crime comedy, could be subtitled *How to Laugh at People Who Talk Minnesotan*.

The film—which has not much at all to do with Fargo, North Dakota—is about the difficulty real folks have pulling off crimes that always go smoothly in fiction. Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) needs a lot of cash, so he hires two thugs (Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare) to kidnap his wife for the ransom money. But these guys aren't smooth criminals; they go nuts trying to put on a galosh or scrape the ice off their windshield. Two incompetent murders later, police chief Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) commences her investigation. And the bad guys get the frozen sweats.

Macy is an ace at doing hysteria in a narrow range, and Buscemi scores as a sick goofus whom one witness lids as “funny-lookin—more than most people even.” There's enough gore to make this a *Mystery Violence Theater*. After some superb mannerist films, the Coens are back in the deadpan realist territory of *Blood Simple*, but without the cinematic elan. *Fargo* is all attitude and low aptitude. Its function is to italicize the Coens' giddy contempt toward people who talk and think Minnesotan. Which is, y'know, kind of a bad deal.

Finally, you can read an online review from the Internet Movie Database, written by two non-professional critics who logged onto the site and wrote their opinions of “Fargo.”

SPOILERS! This modern classic brought to us by the creative Coen brothers is great for the following reasons:

- 1) The actors are brilliant, reveling in roles that are interesting to play. Particularly notable are Macy as the feckless Jerry Lundegaard, McDormand as the affable, partly pixilated, Chief of Police, and of course Buscemi in his element in a role of delicious degeneracy.
- 2) Dialogue. Or perhaps it is better to call it quirky conversation, because that's what it is really. You just have to keep smiling at the accents and nonchalant banter intertwined with telling character development and smart irony. From the cavalier “Ja” interview between McDormand and the two young women who showed the inept criminals a good time, to the priceless parking lot attendant/authority discourse we are treated to a stream of palaver that is amusing and at the same time insightful. We are so entertained that we don't even find it strange that Buscemi's character uses phrases like *force majeure*.
- 3) The bizarre circumstances that intersperse the story that are resolved through violence. From the slapstick-like kidnapping scene to the fortuitous highway massacre to the disgusting wood chipper finale, the violence that underlies the generally flat exterior of the characters is seemingly incongruous. It is however, a reminder that even though the people in this world are somewhat stolid, tumult and depravity pervades beneath the persona. This is driven home in McDormand's expostulation to the surviving criminal near the end.

- 4) Jerry Lundergaard. There are numerous nuances to the film but the most interesting surround Macy. A cashier gives him an egregious simper in a diner, his inept dealings with his oppressive father-in-law lend him our sympathy and his reply to his son, "Just ask Stan Grossman, he'll tell ya!" make us cringe. Two scenes with him are very piquant and tell us much about him: the true-coat scam, and the part where he enters his father-in-law's office to discuss a business deal and there is nowhere for him to sit. Simply brilliant!

A great movie.

Practice

◆ Write a short response to these reviews. Describe the voice in each review, supporting your opinion with a specific example or two.

Play around with voice by rewriting the first paragraph of your response

- for a scholarly film magazine like *Cineaste*
- for a general circulation magazine like *Time*
- for an online movie review site

Readings

On the Run with 2 Buddies and a Gun by Janet Maslin

Janet Maslin was the chief movie critic for the *New York Times* until she resigned in 1999. She wrote this review of Ridley Scott's "Thelma and Louise" in 1991.

"I don't remember ever feeling this awake!" exclaims one of the two freewheeling runaways of Ridley Scott's hugely appealing new road movie, as they race ecstatically across the America Southwest. Funny, sexy, and quick-witted, these two desperadoes have fled the monotony of their old lives and are making up new ones on a minute-by-minute basis. Their adventures, while tinged with the fatalism that attends any crime spree, have the thrilling, life-affirming energy for which the best road movies are remembered. This time there's a difference: This story's daring anti-heroes are beautiful, interesting women.

Mr. Scott's *Thelma and Louise*, with a sparkling screenplay by the first-time writer Callie Khouri, is a surprise on this and many other scores. It reveals the previously untapped talent of Mr. Scott (best known for majestically moody action films like "Alien," "Blade Runner," and "Black Rain") for exuberant comedy, and for vibrant American imagery, notwithstanding his English roots. It reimagines the buddy film with such freshness and vigor that the genre seems positively new. It discovers unexpected resources in both its stars. Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis, who are perfectly teamed as the spirited and original title characters. Ms. Sarandon, whose Louise starts out as a waitress, seems to have walked right out of her "White Palace" incarnation into something much more fulfilling. Ms. Davis may have already won an Oscar (for "The Accidental Tourist"), but for her the gorgeous, dizzy, mutable Thelma still amounts to a career-making role. *Thelma and Louise*, with a haunting dawn-to-nightfall title image that anticipates the story's trajectory, is immediately engaging. Even its relatively inauspicious opening scenes, which show the wisecracking Louise planning a weekend getaway with Thelma, a desperately bore housewife who hates her husband, Darryl (Christopher McDonald), have a self-evident flair.

"Are you at work?" Thelma asks when Louise telephones her from the coffee shop where she is employed somewhere in Arkansas. "No, I'm callin' from the Playboy Mansion," snaps Louise, who goes on to propose a fishing trip to a friend's cabin. "I still don't know how to fish," Thelma muses, nibbling on a frozen candy bar. "Neither do I, sweetie, but Darryl does it," Louise answers. "How hard could it be?"

Soon the two of them have taken off in Louise's turquoise Thunderbird convertible, with Thelma dressed for the occasion in ruffles, denim and pearls. Eager to escape her stifling home life, she has left behind a note for Darryl and borrowed a little something in return: his gun. Later that same evening, when Thelma insists on stopping at a honky-tonk bar despite Louise's protestations, the gun comes in handy. It is used, by Louise, to settle a dispute between Thelma and a would-be rapist (Timothy Carhart) in the parking lot, and it forever changes the complexion of Thelma and Louise's innocent little jaunt. From this point on, they are killers on the run.

Ms. Khouri's screenplay never begins to provide the moral justification for Louise's violent act. But it does a remarkably smooth job of making this and other outlaw gestures at least as understandable as they would be in a traditional western. It also invests them with a certain flair. When detectives investigate the slaying of this inveterate ladies' man, a local waitress says: "Has anyone asked his wife? She's the one I *hope* did it!" Later on, when cornering a truck driver who

has pestered them on the highway, Louise furiously asks, "Where do you get off behavin' like that with women you don't know?"

That "Thelma and Louise" is able to coax a colorful, character-building escapade out of such relatively innocuous beginnings is a tribute to the grace of all concerned, particularly the film's two stars, whose flawless teamwork makes the story gripping and believable from start to finish. On the run, Louise evolves from her former fast-talking self into a much more moving and thoughtful figure, while Thelma outgrows her initial giddy hedonism and develops real grit. Their transformation, particularly in its final stages, gives the film its rich sense of openness and possibility even as the net around Thelma and Louise closes more tightly.

Some of what Thelma learns en route comes by way of a foxy young hitchhiker named J. D. (Brad Pitt, who eradicates the memory of Darryl and also gives a memorable lesson, with the help of a hair dryer, in how to rob a convenience store. "My goodness, you're so gentlemanly about it!" exclaims Thelma. "Well now, I've always believed that if done properly, armed robbery doesn't have to be a totally unpleasant experience," J. D. says.

Like any good road movie, "Thelma and Louise" includes a number of colorful characters who wander entertainingly in and out of the principals' lives. Among them, in this film's fine cast, are Mr. Pitt, who so convincingly wows Thelma; Michael Madsen, bringing shade of Elvis Presley to the role of Louise's once foot-loose and now devoted Beau, and Marvey Keitel and Stephen Tobolowsky, as two of the detectives on Thelma and Louise's trail. Mr. Keitel, in a role resembling the one he has in "Mortal Thoughts," has this time learned to say "mo-tel" in the spirit of the region, and conveys a great and touching concern for the renegades' well-being. His character alone, in a role that could have been perfunctory but is instead so full, gives an indication of how well developed this story is.

Among the film's especially memorable touches are those that establish its feminine side: the way Thelma insists on drinking her liquor from tiny bottles, or the way a weary Louise considers using lipstick after a few days in the desert but then disgustedly throws the thing away. "He's putting on his hat!" Louise confides to Thelma when a police officer stops them, which is surely not the kind of thing two male outlaws would notice. But the film's sense of freedom and excitement, as when the women exult in feeling the wind in their hair, goes well beyond sexual distinctions.

"Thelma and Louise" is greatly enhanced by a tough, galvanizing country-tinged score, and by Adrian Biddle's glorious cinematography, which gives a physical dimension to the film's underlying thought that life can be richer than one may have previously realized. At the story's end, as Thelma and Louise make their way through Monument Valley and to the Grand Canyon, the film truly lives up to its scenery.

"I guess I've always been a little crazy, huh?" Thelma muses in this majestic setting.

"You've always been crazy," Louise acknowledges. "This is just the first chance you've ever had to really express yourself."

Talking Points

1. What is Maslin's opinion of "Thelma and Louise"? Where does the reader first know this opinion?
5. How much of the plot does Maslin reveal? Where? Do you think she gives away too much/just enough? Tell why.
6. Identify all the contextual and background information in the review. Would you like more information? Less? Why?
7. Which film elements does Maslin analyze? How does she support each element?
8. Define Maslin's voice in this review. Choose a few specific lines from the review and explain how they help you form your opinion of her voice.
9. Does Maslin end the review effectively? Why or why not?

Good Fights by David Denby

David Denby has been the film critic of *New York* magazine since 1978 and is a contributing editor of the *New Yorker*, which is where he published this 2002 review of the film *Lord of the Rings*.

In "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring," elongated wizards chew on fleecy white beards and say things like "Eee-vill is stirring in Mordor." The diminutive hobbits, innocent creatures of Middle-earth, are scampering and puckish—they tumble a lot and wear cute little hoods. There are, perhaps, one too many blackened caverns, and there's definitely too much chanting by a male chorus on the soundtrack. The movie is almost three hours long, and it repeats itself more often than a talkative cabbie driving out to the nether regions of Middle-Brooklyn. There are hardly any women on the screen, and when my mind slipped away from the picture, as it did now and then, I had vi-

sions of Carol Burnett, who used to do great movie parodies, flying about in a wizard's cap and choking on her chin feathers. As you can see, I resisted this thing a little bit. Kids may not be reading Tolkien as much as they once did, but in recent years his influence has soaked into teen culture. I've had to feign interest when my boys began collecting the indecipherable Magic cards, which feature wild things and sorcerers and such sub-Tolkien remarks as "The hunted can become the fiercest hunter." "Eee-vill" is also a regular feature in the agitated-electron world of video games, in which fantasy collapses into perpetual combat. Since this is only the first of three Tolkien battle epics, you'd better

get used to your children walking into the living room and saying, "The ring has awakened. It hears its master's call."

But, having stated the terms of my resistance, I have to admit that I capitulated soon enough. Once it gets going (the preliminaries are exhausting), and you get used to its peculiar idiom, "The Lord of the Rings" is consistently beautiful and often exciting—despite some dead passages here and there, it's surely the best big-budget fantasy movie in years. The New Zealander director

Peter Jackson ("Heavenly Creatures"), who also wrote the screenplay with Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens, works with enough dramatic tension and pictorial grandeur to sustain us through long periods of complicated exposition and prolonged bouts of swordplay. Reduced to its main lines, the movie is about the young hobbit Frodo (Elijah Wood), who has been entrusted with the ring that rules all, a ring so dangerous that it corrupts everyone who comes near it. Wood has troubled blue eyes, and every time his Frodo gets into a jam and puts the ring on his finger he sees what looks like a fiery sliver of earth bearing down on him, and he experiences an unspeakable dread. The sliver, in fact, is the eye of the vile Sauron, Lord of Mordor. Sauron has at his disposal an army of orcs—misshapen beasts with mucky gray faces—and he wants to seize the ring so that he can destroy Middle-earth, including the green land of the Shire, where the hobbits live. What to do? With a little help, Frodo realizes that the only salvation lies in conveying the ring to the flaming Mount Doom, in Mordor, where it was forged, and melting it into nothingness. He sets off on this unusual quest—going toward evil rather than away from it—accompanied by a band of irregulars, including the wizard Gandalf (Sir Ian McKellen), two noble human warriors (Viggo Mortensen and Sean Bean), an intemperate, black-bearded dwarf (John Rhys-Davies), and a variety of nattering hobbits. Like many epics, the movie is about the testing of a young man. Frodo must suffer, "die," be reborn, then tempted, and all the rest.

Quite a lot of screen time is needed to get all the plot information out of the wizardly beards and into our ears, in part because the movie wants to tell us what happened centuries ago and how it affects the present. There are apocalyptic, flame-seared flashbacks, and, even if we can't sort out all the references and echoes, we may be impressed by the doomy weight of civilizations rising and falling—the epic span of Tolkien's myth. In the present, the group passes through many trials, each with its own fantastic setting. "The Lord of the Rings" was shot in New Zealand, a paradise still largely devoid of people, and the landscapes—jagged mountains, dark, thickset glens, limitless plains—are both romantic and heroic, like the illustrations from an old children's classic. The shapes and colors of the terrain aren't quite familiar to us, and the strangeness has been enhanced by digital artists. In the woods, the leaves gather up from the ground and fly toward our heroes; at night, we can see into the blackness.

It's in the DNA of quest movies, I suppose, to be episodic: Frodo and his companions rush to get somewhere or other until they run into a fearsome obstacle or fire-breathing danger, which they overcome, escaping at the last second, and the quest then moves onto new turf, where the group faces new perils and thrills. Some of the episodes require no more information than we've been granted—the business of the Ringwraiths, for instance, faceless, black-shrouded riders pursuing the hobbits on black horses. The wraiths are men who have succumbed to the power of the ring, soul-destroyed creatures who serve a merely spectacular function. It would have been nice, however, if Liv Tyler, as Arwen, the Elf princess, had been given more to do than emerge out of the ether and look longingly at Viggo Mortensen. Who is she? The women are stunning but essentially decorative; Cate Blanchett, with her idiosyncratic, translucent beauty—the pale skin and golden hair of a storybook maiden—makes an amazing appearance in shimmering white robes as Galadriel, the Lady of

the Wood, but, like Tyler, she casts a blessing and disappears. The emotional life of the movie takes place entirely among men, who travel and fight side by side, destroying the endless supply of disgusting orcs with sword and bow and arrow. The men are held together by dedication and loyalty. Even the ambiguous character played by the malevolent-looking Sean Bean, a man susceptible to the ring's corrupting power, is sanctified by the quest and is rewarded with a magnificent death. At the end, some stay to defend Middle-earth, some travel to Mordor. The quest goes on and on.

Talking Points

1. Discuss the voice, content, and effect of Denby's introductory paragraph. Explain why you think it does or does not do an effective job of opening the review.
2. What is Denby's thesis in the review? What sentence in the review best states this thesis?
3. How would you characterize Denby's voice in this review? Cite a few examples to support your opinion.
4. Identify the plot summary. In your opinion, is it sufficient for the reader to get a sense of the story line? Why or why not?
5. List the film elements Denby mentions in the review. Divide the list into ones he sees positively and ones he sees negatively.
6. How do you interpret the final line of the review, "The quest goes on and on"?

Too Many Potholes in 'Riding in Cars with Boys' by Heidi Fransen

Heidi Fransen wrote this film review of the newly released "Riding in Cars with Boys" for her writing class in 2001.

Too Many Potholes in *Riding in Cars with Boys*

Get ready for a bumpy ride because *Riding in Cars with Boys*, a flaky adaptation of Beverly D'Onofrio's heartwarming 1990 memoir, drives through countless potholes. Unfortunately, stellar performances by Drew Barrymore and Steve Zahn cannot compensate for the lackluster script that steers the cast and the audience down a dead-end street.

Set in 1965 suburban Connecticut, *Riding* recounts the story of Bev (Barrymore), an aspiring teenager whose life takes a U-turn when she gets pregnant by lovable loafer Ray Hasek (Zahn). Bev's tough cop dad (James Woods) forces her to marry Ray, who degenerates into a lowlife heroin addict. After booting Ray out of their dreary house, the disillusioned and resentful Bev struggles to raise her inconvenient son, Jason, while dusting off her dreams of attending college and pursuing a writing career.

Screenwriter Morgan Upton Ward's half-baked script attempts a flashback framework, jumping between the mid-1960s, when Bev discovers motherhood, and 1986, when Bev and Jason seek out the long-absent Ray for his consent to publish her autobiography. However, this before-and-after structure runs out of gas and breaks down like a 1977 Oldsmobile Barracuda. Ward omits nearly twelve years of Bev's story, depriving the audience of watching Bev's scholastic and occupational achievements and Jason's adolescence. Basically, Ward scraps the part of D'Onofrio's memoir that contains the most movie potential, leaving a huge, unexplained pothole in the screenplay.

Although Barrymore delivers an impressive performance, she is severely limited by Ward's anti-heroic, one-dimensional characterization of Bev. The viewer spends the entire movie stuck in a traffic jam, waiting for Bev's triumphant transformation from self-pitying single mom into college-educated novelist. However, Bev never overcomes her pouty bitterness. While getting high with her best bud, Fay, the scornful Bev whines about the burden of motherhood, confessing that she despises Jason for detouring her life. Meanwhile, the impressionable little Jason is frolicking around within earshot of Bev's shocking complaints. At the end of the movie, when Bev and Jason finally arrive at Ray's trashy trailer house, Bev's only concern is securing Ray's consent to publish her book. Jason's climatic encounter with the father he hasn't seen in twelve years completely escapes the egocentric Bev, who still has a massive chip on her shoulder. Gosh, Bev, just get over it!

Since Ward doesn't illustrate Bev's inspiring challenge to manage college, raise her teen son, or write her own book, he prevents Bev from evolving into an admirable or sympathetic person. Instead, the toil Bev must have invested in her education is reduced to a mere assumption, and her newly authored book seems completely undeserved. The fact that Jason narrates the movie and not Bev also inhibits Bev's evolution into a heroic character. Beverly D'Onofrio wrote her own memoir, so logically she should narrate the movie of her memoir, but Ward foolishly gives the car keys to Jason.

Director Penny Marshall's ill-timed injections of humor make Bev's character even more shallow and dislikeable. Repeatedly, Marshall reduces to tacky comedy the moments when Bev could mature and grow. When the drug-dependent Ray is writhing on the bed from heroin withdrawal, Bev pops into little Jason's room to dance the hokey

pokey. Then, when the unsupervised Jason nearly drowns in a hot tub, Bev almost comes to his rescue, absent-mindedly dropping him back in the water. Oh, that disdainful but occasionally wacky Bev!

Steve Zahn's performance as the endearing delinquent Ray is the movie's saving grace. Zahn beautifully captures Ray's empty-headedness without stooping to base stupidity. Zahn's slight stutter and thoughtful pauses between words make magic out of the most simple lines of dialogue. When Zahn's character proposes to Bev, he says, "I love you. A lot." Zahn's heartbeat of a pause between the two sentences effectively demonstrates Ray's sincerity, and Bev cannot refuse to go along for the ride.

Unlike with Bev's character, Ward and Marshall beautifully craft Ray into an extremely sympathetic one. In the emotionally intense scene when Ray tells Bev about his heroin addiction, he has to read aloud a confession letter. Here, Marshall successfully translates Ray's internal struggle outward, as Ray's dependence on the letter's speech mimics his dependence on heroin. When Ray reappears at the end of the movie, his character development is complete: he's scruffy and idle, living in a dump with a termagant wife. Yet Ray is still the good-natured guy he's always been, and the hug he shares with Jason is truly tear jerking.

The costumes and props, designed by Cynthia Flynt, reflect the period of the movie so well that subtitled dates aren't necessary. In the 1960s, Bev and her gal pals cruise around in a vintage Cadillac, the wind mussing up their beehive hair-dos. In 1970, Ray grows a moustache and Bev sports bell-bottoms and long braids. However, Ward misses a big opportunity to incorporate the slang of the era into the script's dialogue. When the spunky teen Bev attends a boy-girl party, Ward fails to creatively distinguish

the period via popular mid-60s phraseology. The unsurprisingly arrogant football players call Bev a “pathetic loser,” a common put-down used in several recent teen flicks, including the movie titled *Loser*, which hit theaters in summer 2000. Surely mid-60s name-calling was more interesting than Ward’s dialogue suggests. The music selection also falls short of its potential, sticking to the same tunes that have appeared on oodles of movie soundtracks, such as Sonny and Cher’s “I’ve Got You Babe” and Cindy Lauper’s “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.”

The recreation of Wallingford, Connecticut, where Beverly D’Onofrio grew up, is a top-notch depiction of mid 1960s suburban life and one of *Riding*’s better qualities. Bev’s childhood home has a genuine homespun feel, and the dingy house she moves into with Ray feels cheap, symbolic of Bev’s view that she has been shortchanged. Also symbolic is the circular shape of Bev and Ray’s neighborhood; her life is just one continuous cycle of diaper changes, arguments, and letdowns. Poor Bev is driving in circles again.

Time to add *Riding in Cars with Boys* to the long list of movies that *might* have been great. Too bad Ward didn’t pull over and ask for directions.

Talking Points

1. Identify the major structural elements of Fransen's review: the introduction, the thesis, the contextual and background information, the plot summary, the analysis, and the conclusion. How good a job does Fransen do in incorporating these elements into her review?
2. How credible is Fransen's voice? Does she succeed in establishing her authority as an insightful film reviewer? Why or why not?
3. Fransen plays around with the metaphor of driving throughout her review. In your view, does this add to the liveliness of her voice or is it distracting? Support your answer with a few specific examples.
4. In your opinion, which elements of the film does Fransen analyze most convincingly? Least convincingly? Support your answer.

Writer's Notebook

Use these exercises to jump-start your thinking as you begin to write your film review.

1. Write a letter to a friend telling him/her about the most recent movie you've seen. Write in your own voice.
2. You've just been hired to write blurbs for the backs of the boxes of new video releases. You're limited to one paragraph per film. Write blurbs for two movies you've seen recently, one you liked and one you didn't. Remember that you're hired to sell the films, not review them.
3. Decide on a movie, perhaps one that you've seen recently, perhaps the one you intend to review. Write its name in the middle of a blank sheet of paper and circle it. Create a cluster of words and phrases that express your varied responses to the film. (You may want to reread the section on **Clustering** in Chapter 1 before you do this exercise.)
4. Make a list of the most clichéd movie review phrases you can recall.
5. Write down on a piece of paper the words "cinematography," "soundtrack," and "special effects." Under each heading, write a list of excellent examples of that element from movies you've seen.

6. Write down on a piece of paper the words “acting,” “production design,” “and “screenplay.” Under each heading, write a list of badly done examples of that element from movies you’ve seen.
7. Write an advertisement for your favorite movie. It can be an ad for a newspaper, a radio spot, a poster, or a Web site.

Peer Editing and Revision

These questions and suggestions are designed to help you rethink your film review between your current and final drafts. If you are working with a writing partner or in a peer-editing group, the questions can serve as prompts for discussion as you workshop the reviews. These questions are also useful to ask yourself as you work on your final revision.

1. What technique do you use in your lead? Does the lead bring your reader quickly into the film? If not, see if you can cut the first paragraph or even eliminate it altogether.
2. State your opinion of the film. Have you expressed this opinion in a clear thesis statement? If not, write a clear thesis and insert it in the first paragraph.
3. Have you provided some background or contextual information for your reader? If not, you might need to do some additional research at this point.
4. Does the plot summary contain essential information and at the same time not give away any surprises or plot twists? Cut any passages that tell too much.
5. Have you selected the criteria that best support your opinion of the film? Go through your review and make sure each criterion is clearly defined and adequately discussed. Make sure you have included some discussion of the visual aspects of the film.
6. Have you provided specific evidence to support your opinion of the film? Read through your review and check that each criterion you discuss has a specific piece of evidence to support it. This might be a good time to reread your notes or even watch selected portions of the film again, looking for supporting examples.
7. Is the voice of the review informal and lively? Check to make sure you haven’t used any clichéd language. Cut wordiness, substitute active verbs for passive ones, and make any word changes that add freshness to your voice.
8. Does your voice fit the intended publication? Read a review from the magazine or newspaper you’ve selected as a publication site. Make sure the level of your vocabulary and voice, and the depth of your analysis, are consistent with the standard in the publication.
9. Has the ending reemphasized your position? Do you leave your reader amused and/or better informed? If not, rework the conclusion, using one of the techniques discussed in this chapter.

Markets

The film review is one of the easier pieces to place in the market. Student newspapers and college art magazines are always on the lookout for good movie reviews. And, as you've seen, there are many sites on the Web where you can just log on and type in your review of a movie. You might not get paid, but you do get the pleasure of seeing your review in print, and you can get a clip for your portfolio.

If you are a serious movie buff, you might be able to get a part-time job reviewing for a local paper. You can write a review of a movie in current release and send it in to the arts editor as a sample of your work, or you can contact the editor by phone or email and ask whether the paper could use a freelance movie critic. Either way, it is possible to gain some experience writing reviews and getting them published.

Chapter 5

Profiles

"An ordinary life examined closely reveals itself to be exquisite and complicated, somehow managing to be both heroic and plain."

- Susan Orlean-

Definition

In painting a portrait, an artist sets out to create a likeness of a person, a recognizable image. The artist's aim, however, is only in small part to record the details of the subject—color of hair, slope of nose, curve of smile. The real art of painting a portrait is in the way the artist interprets the subject, the way the artist reveals the person in the picture. In a good portrait, through some combination of light and shadow, expression, and detail, the essence of the subject emerges—not just the likeness of a person but the character.

A profile, too, is a portrait, a word portrait. It is an in-depth look at a person from a specific perspective, from a specific angle. This angle, or perspective, makes the portrait very different from a general picture of a person, what might amount to a simple "driver's license" description: height, weight, and birthday, for example.

Here is a list of facts about a writer you most likely know well. Chances are that though you are familiar with at least three of his books, you may not recognize this writer from the general view of him that follows:

He was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, on March 2, 1904, and graduated from Dartmouth College in 1925. He went to Oxford University, trying to get a doctorate in literature. He married a woman he met at Oxford named Helen Palmer. After returning to the United States, he worked for a humor magazine. Later, he joined the army during World War II and was sent to Hollywood. He won several Oscars for his documentaries about Adolph Hitler, and one for a cartoon called Gerald McBoing-Boing.

Here you get facts about the writer's life--some fairly interesting ones. Still, the facts of this life, listed the way they are, don't give your reader a clue about who this person really is. Instead of a portrait, which reveals an understanding of some basic element of character, we get a mug shot: information without interpretation.

Here's a different version, one that has a perspective, an angle:

He used to doodle in school, strange little drawings.

His high-school art teacher told him never to plan a career in art. Likewise, his writing teacher at Dartmouth College discouraged him from becoming a writer. Even his fraternity brothers voted him least likely to succeed. Being misunderstood, though, would not get in his way. This writer's first children's book was rejected 43 times. Then a friend agreed to publish it. The writer went on to win an Oscar for a cartoon, but even more important, he kept trying new things. At the encouragement of his publisher, he set out on a campaign against boring children's books, hoping to make learning to read more interesting than Dick and Jane had. And, in 1954, using a list of 220 words he thought a first grader could learn, he wrote an instantly successful book. It was called *The Cat in the Hat*.

(adapted from material from *Outpost 10F*, *Poetry Guild*, and *Stories for a Teen's Heart*)

The writer, more easily identified in the second paragraph, is Theodore Geisel, known all over the world as Dr. Seuss, author of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Green Eggs and Ham*—a total of 44 children's books. From your own familiarity with his quirky, idiosyncratic, easily identified style, you can see how the description in paragraph two focuses his character, creating a picture of a unique artist and his early conflicts, not just giving a list of achievements.

Your goal in writing a profile is to bring this kind of interpretation about character to your description of a person. Author Megan Easton compares writing a profile to going through somebody's house and closets in search of a few items that define the identity of their owner. The profile is like arranging just those objects on the sidewalk in front of the house and saying, "This is who lives here." As in choosing the items on the sidewalk, in choosing the parts of a life to highlight, you create a clear, focused impression of a person—a portrait.

Readers are always interested in taking a look at the items on the sidewalk, at the lives of others, thus the popularity of profiles in magazines and newspapers. Offering a glimpse into the lives of others appeals to both the voyeuristic and the philosophical sides of your readers. By looking closely at the struggles, commitments, and decisions of others, we may recognize ourselves. Along the way, we also learn about professions, passions, and lifestyles of others—famous, infamous, and even ordinary people.

In addition to mainstream publications, profiles are commonly used in business and publicity through newsletters and quarterly reports. Alumni magazines at colleges and universities publish profiles about employees and graduates. Many groups produce specialty publications profiling members or other people who might be of interest to members.

You will focus your profile on a living person in order to practice observing and interviewing. The skills you will learn from writing a profile will prove useful in writing many types of research papers, including historical biographies. It will also enhance your interviewing skills, which you'll find useful whether you're interviewing for a job or hiring someone yourself one day. In this chapter you will:

- Find a focal point for a portrait, a descriptive thesis
- Combine narrative and expository writing

- **Integrate multiple research sources, including interviews, direct observation, publications, and online source**

Collaborative Activity

In this exercise, you will create an impression of a character you have studied.

1. Go to a public place: a restaurant, park, or lobby, for example. Choose one person to observe for as long as ten minutes. Make notes of the person's gestures, body language, clothing, hairstyle. If you can catch a few words of dialogue, write them down.
2. Decide what impression that person made on you.
3. Without telling your reader what you think about the person, describe, in one paragraph, what you observed. Select and arrange details and choose words that will help shape your reader's impression.
4. When you return to the classroom, read your paragraphs out loud. Have classmates tell you what impression they get from your writing.

Genre Considerations

In writing the profile, you will use a combination of the skills you have learned from writing narratives, arguments, and analyses. The profile format gives you a lot of flexibility in choosing which skills to use, and it gives you a chance to be creative while defending your interpretation of your subject—also called the thesis of your profile.

In explaining and defending your interpretation, you will rely on research from many sources: facts from background reading, studies and statistics, description from observation, and expert opinion from interviews. When it's complete, the profile will be a well-reasoned explanation of your interpretation.

Writing Exposition

One of the techniques you've used in your other writing but perhaps not focused on yet is writing exposition, or writing explanations. Expository passages explain everything from background information of your profile subject to difficult scientific concepts.

Exposition is like voice-over in a film; it explains what the audience is seeing on the screen and what may have happened off camera. At times, this voice simply moves the story from one segment to another. At other times, it provides commentary, perhaps even ironic comments.

the story from one segment to another. At other times, it provides commentary, perhaps even ironic comments.

Here is an example of exposition from a profile about a writer of vampire novels who has a complicated method of creating characters and following them through their fantastic mutations. First, the author sets up the exposition with a piece of description by saying, "At her computer, Amelia prints out a seven-page character genealogy." Then the author explains the chart:

It's a document of stunning complexity:
creatures spawning new creatures, most of whom can
both shift shapes and time-travel and are therefore apt
to remeet or remate or retrospectively kill one another.
It will require a dizzying number of books to
straighten their histories out. (from "The Craft" by
Melanie Thornstrom, from *The New Yorker*, October
18 & 25, 1999)

In this passage, the exposition gives a concise summary of Amelia's complicated character genealogy. Thornstrom, the author of the profile, shows us what the document looks like by giving us an explanation, a kind of overview. She also includes judgment and interpretation, saying that (in her opinion) the complexity of the characters will take many books to flesh out.

What to include—how much narrative, exposition, analysis, or persuasion—and how to structure a profile depend on who your subject is and where you decide you want to publish it. A celebrity profile, for example, requires more anecdotal material and may be mostly narrative and descriptive in structure. The magazines in which you find this type of profile focus mostly on covering the entertainment world. On the other hand, a profile of scientist who works with stem-cell research, written for a magazine like *Scientific American*, would most probably use a great deal of exposition, explaining difficult technical concepts in clear language.

Elements of a Profile

In order to get an understanding of a subject—so you will be able to make a portrait that has depth and meaning for your reader—your research will take several forms: listening, watching, reading, asking questions. You will make extensive notes. When you have finished your research, your notes will include all kinds of information—stories from people who know about your subject, details you recorded while watching your subject, dialogue between your subject and an associate, facts from studies. A good profile has all of these things, combined in a structure that flows effortlessly from one point to another. Four essential profile elements are :

1. Physical Description
2. Quotations
3. Illustrations
4. Factual Information

Here are some examples of these elements chosen from a profile about Marion Pritchard, an 81-year-old psychoanalyst from Vermont who “rescued scores of children from the Holocaust, survived seven months in a Nazi prison, and killed one Nazi who got in her way.” (from “A Hidden and Solitary Soldier” by J. R. Moehringer, the *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 2002)

Physical Description

Physical description should be brief and relevant: The details of a physical description should give your reader a sense of a character. In the following excerpt, the writer J. R. Moehringer contrasts Pritchard’s physical smallness with her heroic stature. Putting a character in a setting, as Moehringer does, can enhance the character’s physical description and help emphasize a particular character trait.

Standing in her garden, not much taller than her sweet peas and daylilies, Pritchard doesn’t look like the intrepid rescuer who defied the Third Reich. Sitting in her book-lined living room, speaking in a thin voice that crackles like a fire, she gives no hint of the cunning rebel who risked her life for strangers.

Quotations from the subject

Quotations are the lifeblood of a profile. Sometimes *how* a character says something—the words she chooses, the way her voice lowers—can be as significant as what she says. Likewise, a gesture can be as telling as a quotation and can imply information about character. In the following sentences, for example, take the description of Pritchard’s gesture away from her quotation and see the difference in meaning.

Pritchard coughs and covers her mouth. She looks away and her eyes fill with tears. “It’s funny,” she says. “You can tell a tale a lot of times and then, suddenly, for some reason, it gets harder.”

In this quotation and description, you don’t get a lot of biographical facts, but instead you get to know Pritchard and how her past still bears down on her, even after much time has passed.

Quotations about the subject

Like quotations *from* your subject, quotations *about* your subject give meaning that goes beyond simple information. These quotations are powerful because they are firsthand testimony of experts--people who know your subject or who know about the issues raised in your profile.

Erika Polak's family had been sheltered by Pritchard during the war. Though Polak was very young during the time Pritchard helped her family, she makes an excellent firsthand source. Though some of what she has to say about Pritchard is paraphrased, notice that the writer's selected quotation has the sound of conversation to it.

Meeting Pritchard many years after the war, Erika Polak had trouble believing this small, dignified grandmother was once all that stood between her and the camps. "She's such a tiny woman," Erika says by phone from her home in Holland. "She came from a very sophisticated family. And then, to go underground, to do such brave things? It's unbelievable."

Someone who knows about the issues in the profile, an "expert," also makes a good source for quotations, even though your expert may not know the profile subject personally. Here's an example of an expert who happens to be familiar with the subject but might have provided the same commentary without knowing her.

People who make such decisions [to help others at risk to themselves] are the products of extraordinary parents, says Eva Fogelman, who has studied Holocaust rescuers, including Pritchard, for years. Most rescuers, Fogelman has found, were given an exquisite sense of justice as children, along with an unwavering self-confidence, "so they could withstand fears."

Illustrations

Your profile needs proof, verbal illustrations that back up your generalizations and theories about your subject. These illustrations—similar to brief stories—are examples of how or when your subject did something noteworthy or revealing of character. You could make a list. Or you could cite a few examples that make a concept perfectly clear. For example, to make the concept of Pritchard's lasting emotional scars clear, the writer begins with a short sentence of exposition, a basic topic sentence making a generalization, and then she cites two examples to prove the generalization.

Memories of prison return to her, unbidden, at odd moments. In an elevator or a strange bathroom, if the door doesn't open right away, she feels trapped. Having a manicure, she recalls the way she filed her nails in prison, by rubbing them against her cell walls.

Some of the best illustrations of character come in the form of these kinds of anecdotes. Your source for these stories can be your subject or people who know your subject well. The following anecdote is a combination of paraphrase and direct quotation, told by the profile subject. Notice the way the writer selects certain details--the gun that was given to Pritchard by a friend was behind some books—and the way the writer uses exposition to enhance the story.

Then there was the Nazi she killed, a sadistic Dutch policeman she'd known all her life. He surprised her one night at the farmhouse, no sound of a motor to warn her, no time to hide the Polaks in the pit. Acting on a tip, the policeman crept up to the farmhouse on foot and burst in the door. "Somebody must have betrayed us," Pritchard says.

In that terrible moment, Pritchard says, there was no choice. Behind some books on a shelf was a gun given to her by a friend. She grabbed the gun and fired. "One shot," she says. "Dead as a doornail."

She doesn't remember pulling the trigger.

Factual information

Reading print and electronic sources will provide you with many different kinds of information that will help develop your profile. Statistics might help clarify context and give a full understanding of how unique or typical your subject is. Previously published news stories about your subject can also be good sources of background and can help to fill out the story.

In 1981, Pritchard was honored by Yad Vashem, Israel's official Holocaust authority, as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations." Her name was placed in the pantheon of Israel's national heroes, alongside Holocaust rescuers such as Oskar Schindler.

Here, knowing Pritchard is listed alongside the more famous Oskar Schindler helps us gauge the significance of her contribution. The analogy gives a context for understanding how important Pritchard's work was.

Practice

Read through a profile from a current publication or choose one from the readings in this chapter. Find an example of each of the elements discussed here: physical description; quotations—from the subject and about the subject--illustrations, examples or anecdotes; and factual information.

Assignment

Write a 5-7 page profile. Your writing should include a focus on a part of the subject's life or personality that has resonance for a reader. Your profile should include:

- Research that includes 3 interviewed sources, including your subject, and 2 print or electronic sources for background material
- An opening that attracts the reader's attention
- A nut graf, or thesis, that clearly states the focus
- Quotations, anecdotes, and illustrations
- A structure that flows and develops the focus and integrates the quotations, research, narrative, and exposition

Warm-up Exercise

This exercise is done in pairs. You and your partner should interview each other, using the suggestions for resume-type questions and evergreen questions later in this chapter. Don't be limited by these questions. Add your own. Let the conversation wander into unexpected territory. At the end of 30 minutes, write a three-paragraph profile of your classmate, focusing on a single trait or aspect of his or her personality. Integrate some physical details (descriptions of the subject and setting), and some quotations into your mini-profile.

Collect

Choosing a good profile subject

A good profile subject is a noteworthy person, someone whose story might be interesting to your readers. You don't have to admire the person you will write about, but you should find his or her accomplishments, lifestyle, or philosophy worth further exploration.

Although many published profiles are written about famous people, don't be discouraged if you lack access to celebrities. Not all profiles published in newspapers and magazines are about the rich and the famous. The media are starting to heed the old axiom: everybody has a story.

In fact, the ordinary-person genre has become a professional crusade for one reporter, Dave Johnson, at the Lewiston, Idaho, *Morning Tribune*. Johnson selects a name randomly out of the phone book for his features about people not normally considered "newsmakers." Johnson says he can make anyone an interesting profile subject. Sometimes, though, he just gets lucky and doesn't have to create the interest. Through his random calls, he often stumbles across a great profile subject. Three of these have been a professional wrestler, a hairstylist for corpses, and the most productive marijuana producer in Idaho.

Choosing an interesting profile subject is important, but even more important is finding the story in your subject's life that will resonate for your reader. You can often locate this meaning in a point of tension or conflict. You may begin by exploring, for example, whether professional wrestling is aboveboard and how this particular wrestler deals with the perception of fakery in the sport. Or you might explore how the hairstylist deals with handling dead bodies, how she feels about death. Is her notion of death different because she works with corpses?

Here are some questions that might help you think about subjects for your profile:

1. Is your subject in some way related to a news story or some current trend or idea?
2. Is your subject in some way unusual, odd, offbeat?
3. Can you link your subject to a noteworthy achievement, an innovation, contribution, or discovery?
4. If your subject is not unique, then how does he or she fit in? Does your subject represent what's typical about a profession, interest, lifestyle, or conflict? Can your subject reveal something found in others with the same profession, interest, lifestyle, or conflict?
5. Why would readers be interested in reading about this person? What might readers learn or gain from reading your profile?

Practice: Select a subject

- Make a list of people in your town or college community that readers of a local newspaper would find interesting.
- Choose one of these story ideas. Write a two-paragraph "query letter," a letter in which you present your story idea to a features editor, explaining why readers would find the topic interesting. Sell the story idea in as few words as possible. (The "Markets" section of this chapter includes a detailed discussion of query letters.)

Researching Your Profile

Research is the necessary first step to writing a profile. How interesting your story is to your reader hinges on what you discover—and uncover—in your research.

The more you learn, the stronger and more credible your voice becomes, and the more material you have to liven and focus your writing. Once you have figured out *who* will be the subject of your profile, you're ready to begin your search for good material.

Here's where all the research techniques you've learned come into play. A well-researched profile includes:

- print and electronic sources
- interviews with many people (multiple sources)
- direct observation of the person in a place that has relevance to the character

Print and Electronic Sources

A good place to start your research is at the library, where you can educate yourself about your subject's field. Background information gives you insight into the world you are revealing in your profile as well as contextual information, facts, and statistics you may need to integrate into your piece.

So, for example, if you are interviewing a female firefighter, read about the history of women as firefighters. Begin with a Nexus-Lexis search online—you can do this at most libraries. Find magazine articles, trade journals, and books about firefighting. Read personal accounts; find out what percentage of the country's firefighters are women; become thoroughly familiar with the conflicts or controversies surrounding women breaking into traditionally male fields. This kind of information adds depth and interest to a profile.

Background research also helps you prepare for your interviews and observations and gives you an insider's view. Undoubtedly, you will come up with better, more informed questions after you've done some initial background reading. If your subject has any publications, be sure to read those as well. Not only will you gain insight into your subject's ideas, but you will also be able to establish a much more friendly rapport when you can open an interview—or a request for an interview—with a statement like, "In your book (article, interview), you said...."

Keep detailed and accurate notes as you do your research. Be sure to copy direct quotes word-for-word and put quotation marks immediately around any words you take from a source. As with all quoted material, note:

- author(s) or editor(s) of the material
- title of book, magazine, or Web site
- publisher of the material
- date of publication
- page number of the quotation

In a published profile, the convention is to cite the sources in the text of the profile rather than on a separate Works Cited page, though many writing instructors do require both in-text citations and a Works Cited page at the end of the article. In either case you need to record all the pertinent information for your attribution. For example, you might write in your profile of a female firefighter, “According to the bureau of Labor Statistics in 2001, only 2% of the firefighters in the United States were women.”

Practice

Here is a list of possible profile subjects:

- a high school teacher who has just been named the “Math Teacher of the Year”
- a lawyer who works as a public defender
- an inventor who is working on creating a non-polluting combustion engine
- a marathon runner

Choose one of these subjects and do a search of print and electronic sources that you could read for background information. Make a list of at least three sources. Use correct bibliographical citation.

Interviews with your subject

Once you have completed your background reading, schedule an interview with your subject. Depending on how well known or busy the person is, you might have to spend a fair amount of time just setting up a meeting. If you don’t know your subject personally, make your initial contact by phone or email and be honest and direct about what you’re requesting. Tell your subject that you’re a college student interested in writing a profile on what it’s like to be a female firefighter or a college hockey star. Ask for exactly what you think you’ll need—an hour or an afternoon of her time. You’ll most likely be pleasantly surprised at how eager most people are to talk about what they do or what they think.

Try to set up the interview in the subject’s “native habitat” or a place that gives you material for your story, a chance to see the character in action. Such details as photos on the desk, the miniature putting green in the front lobby, or the bubbling espresso machine can help reveal your subject’s personality and set the tone for the story.

Go to the interview equipped with good questions. What you get from your source is key to the quality of the final profile; in fact, many profile writers believe that no amount of good writing can replace good reporting.

Once you’ve done your initial research, you should have some questions in mind. It’s a good idea to go to the interview with at least 10 written questions, so you can prompt yourself if you lose your way, but the best interviews are conversations not question-and-answer sessions. You can always begin with general questions, “resume-type” questions about where your subject grew up and went to school, what kind of family he came from, how she got interested in a particular occupation, interest, or

lifestyle. “What are you doing when you’re not working?” often opens up an interesting path of inquiry.

Whatever you decide to focus on—whether it is professional life or personal interests—listen especially for anecdotes: brief stories. Anecdotes can reveal a great deal about your subject and be excellent ways for you to illustrate a point about your subject through “showing” and not “telling.”

Reporters often use “evergreen” questions, simple questions that help solicit anecdotes. Writing coach John Rains suggests these evergreen questions:

1. Who influenced you most in your life?
2. How would you describe yourself as a (fill in the blank—boss, student, mother, actress, doctor)?
3. What was the best (or worst) thing that ever happened to you?
4. What has surprised you about your (job, interest, lifestyle)?

These questions are not meant as a script for your interview but simply a way to jump-start an interview and lead you to some good stories.

Interviews with Supporting Characters

If you just tell a story from your subject’s perspective, you haven’t really written a profile as much as an as-told-to story. You only have your subject’s necessarily biased point of view. The way to open up your profile, to gain more balanced and more complex perspectives—even contradictory or negative ones—is to provide your reader with multiple points of view about your subject. You do that by interviewing as many people as you can who can provide insight into your subject.

These people can be coworkers, relatives, neighbors, and competitors, to name a few. If you are writing about the owner of the first Vietnamese noodle shop in town, for example, interviewing other nearby restaurant owners might give you some interesting perspective on the business. Interviewing the owner’s spouse, children, chef, and wait staff adds another layer to the story. Phoning the food critic who gave the new restaurant four stars might give you even more information on the owner’s abilities.

The commentary of these “supporting characters” provides the multiple perspectives that make for an interesting and credible story. Reporting the various ways people see your subject helps give a sense of balance to your profile. But you must be careful to consider the sources. Some may be biased either for or against your subject. The rival restaurant owner has a lot at stake, as does his or her award-winning chef. Make sure you evaluate your sources and reveal their relationships to the subject, so your readers have full knowledge of their biases and can make their own judgments.

Quotations

Quotations from your subject and from people who offer comments for your profile provide many perspectives on your subject. Good quotations can be irreverent, contradictory, eccentric, funny, witty, or wry. From quotations you can get character,

irony, and pure information. The best quotations can sum up a point, provide an image, reveal character, or create some edge or tension for the piece. They should also be articulate—clear and accessible—unless what they are intended to reveal is a person’s nervousness, lack of speaking skills, or even evasiveness.

Your job as an interviewer is to get the quotation and to record it accurately. As a writer, you try to select the best quotations and use them to the story’s best advantage. Avoid quotations that state the obvious or that add no new information. Remember that there are three ways to use quotations: partial quotations, full quotations and paraphrasing. Here’s a quick review:

- Full quotation: a full sentence or two, transcribed exactly as spoken, in quotation marks and with attribution to the speaker.
- Partial quotation: selected words or phrases, in quotation marks, with attribution.

Use full or partial quotes when the quotation uses clear and powerful language and provides insight into a character.

- Paraphrase: someone else’s idea in your language. Use no quotation marks but cite clear attribution to the speaker. Paraphrase long or wordy quotes or quotes in which the language is fuzzy or vague, grammatically incorrect, or confusing.

Sidebar: How to Punctuate Quotations

When the quotation is a statement:

- Separate the attribution from the quotation with a comma.

Example: “Students genuinely fear him,” said Graveline.

- Put periods inside quotation marks.

Example: He said, “I have the other one at home.”

When the quotation is a question:

- Put question marks inside the quotation marks.

Example: “So why do you keep teaching?” I ask.

When a quotation is part of a question:

- Put question marks outside the quotation marks.

Example: What did he mean by “Marcus had eight assists”?

When the quotation is interrupted by the attribution:

- Use a comma before the attribution, inside the first quotation marks, and after the attribution.

Example: “Nice lead,” he said, then commented,, “if we don’t count its being dull, pointless, and triply redundant.”

When you are quoting somebody speaking about a quotation:

- Use a single quotation mark to set off the words that the speaker is quoting.

- Use double quotation marks around the speaker's full statement.

Example: "Students would come in crying 'mental abuse' or I can't take it in there," says BU grad Maryellen Kennedy.

Practice

Below is a list of quotations gathered for a profile about Damian DiPaola, the owner and chef—or as he prefers it, "cook"—at an Italian restaurant. The writer, David Maloof, gathered these quotations from interviews with DiPaola, from watching DiPaola in conversation with coworkers.

- Decide which quotations you would (a) quote fully (b) quote partially (c) paraphrase or (d) omit.
- Give reasons for your decisions.

1. "I've been making cappuccinos since I was four years old in my Dad's café."
2. "My sister taught me English and Italian when I first came to this country."
3. "My mother had a knack for making the greatest dinners with the least ingredients. She used lots of vegetables and fish and pasta. My father would make the elaborate meals, such as lobster *fra diavlo* and rack of lamb."
4. "A chef is someone who runs around with a clipboard and a pen and then goes out in the dining room and takes credit for everything."
5. "Growing up as a kid, I was very irresponsible."
6. "When I was 13, I was the same size I am now, and I used to go out to nightclubs with older workers from my father's café."
7. "I was 28 when I got married."
8. "I did have a house but when I bought my [business] partner out I had to sell the house."
9. "About a year ago, I weighed 205. I lost 35 pounds. I ate a lot of angel hair pasta with escarole in chicken broth."
10. "When I bartend, no one wants to sit at the bar."
11. [to a waitress]: "You don't like Frank Sinatra, it doesn't make you a bad person. It just means you have lousy taste in music."
[waitress]: "You ever hear of the group 'Phish'?"
[him]: "You ever hear of the group 'Calamari'?"
12. "You have to be very disciplined to run a good restaurant."
13. "We're not 'chefs' here. We prefer to be called 'cooks.' 'Chef' is a French word. It means 'chief' or 'commander' of the kitchen."

14. “[Scuba] diving is very effortless. It’s timeless. It’s almost like flying—not a plane, but like a bird. You can do cartwheels, somersaults. It’s like dancing. It’s very relaxing. It’s another world.”

Notes by David Maloof for "Pan Music," a profile of the owner of Carmelina's at the Common, published in *Hampshire Life Magazine* section of *The Daily Hampshire Gazette*, 6/27/97.

Observation

Novelist Eudora Welty said, “stories don’t happen nowhere.” She was talking about the significance of setting in creating an impression. Characters in profiles, as in fiction, inhabit places, and the places they inhabit reveal something about who they are.

If you can “shadow” your profile subject for a day or an afternoon, observe the person in daily life--teaching gymnastics, racing dirt bikes, or painting a picture--you’ll be able to glean “showing” details and establish a solid narrative base for your profile.

Take notes as you observe your subject either in the interview or in action. Observe the gestures, pauses in conversation, mannerisms that reveal some quirk or characteristic. Observe the setting—the earth tones of the organic farmer’s kitchen or the original art over the mantelpiece of the dining room. All these details may come in handy when you are creating a scene in your profile.

Practice

Here is the opening passage of a profile that starts with a character-in-action description of Kara Walker, who has been called one of the “hottest and most controversial black artists in America.” The profile begins with a scene showing the artist creating one of the black silhouettes of nineteenth-century plantation life that have garnered her much public attention and many honors—including a \$190,000 MacArthur Foundation “genius” award when she was 27. As you read, note the observed details the writer includes.

Kara Walker, a tall, slender young woman dressed in blue jeans, white T-shirt, and a gray hooded sweatshirt, stands before a studio wall covered with black paper. A Radiohead CD plays in the background as she contemplates the empty blackness. Suddenly, as though something has just occurred to her, she starts to draw quick, light, sure lines with a white wax pencil held in the long, elegant fingers of her right hand. In a matter of minutes, she has laid down an arresting image of a hoop-skirted and frilly-

bonneted black woman expressing milk from her breast directly into the mouth of a small child.

(from “Cutting Edge or Over the Line?” by Edgar Allen Beem, the *Boston Globe Magazine*, December 30, 2001)

What is your overall impression of Kara Walker based on this passage? Which details lead you to that conclusion?

Select

Finding a focus

The focus of your profile provides your reader with the reason why your subject is interesting and worth reading about. Even before starting your research, you sometimes know the answer to the question, “Why is this person interesting to a reader?” You know, for example, that an eccentric teacher’s unorthodox methods excite kids about history or that a student’s year studying in China has changed his or her view of the world. These are both good focal points for profiles. Each story can be both specific to its subject and yet have larger implications—about how people learn or about how other people live—that a reader might find interesting.

To find a focus, consider some aspects of newsworthiness—notoriety, celebrity, a tie to recent events—to find the angle for your story. You might not find a focus for your profile until you’ve completed your research. Research often uncovers a new meaning about your subject, one that you weren’t necessarily looking for, unearthing a compelling, previously untold story.

Peter Scanlan, in *The Quill*, a publication of the Society of Professional Journalists, gives this advice for shaping a profile focus: Look for conflicts, questions, obstacles, or “pivotal moments” in somebody’s story. These can be

- when things have changed
- when things will never be the same
- when things have fallen apart
- when you don’t know how things will turn out.

For example, using the pivotal moment of “when you don’t know how things will turn out,” a profile of a singer on the rise might explore the chances that the rise will continue—or plummet. The profile of a radiologist who became an acupuncturist might explore this unusual turn-of-events: why the switch?

Stating Your Thesis in a Nut Graf

In a profile, the thesis is usually stated explicitly in a paragraph that journalists call the “nut graf.” “Nut” refers to the kernel of the idea; “graf” is journalistic shorthand for “paragraph.” The nut graf announces your focus, that is, your subject

and the point you're making about your subject. Some writers also call this paragraph the "bridge graf," another way to understand its function. It provides the bridge between the lead and the body of the paper, and that's where it is usually found, directly after the lead.

When you craft your nut graf, you provide a statement that tells your reader *who* the subject is and *why* his or her story is interesting. In the earlier example about Kara Walker, the artist who made silhouettes of nineteenth-century plantation life, the "nut" of the article—which comes directly after the lead paragraph—tells us she is "one of the hottest—and most controversial—black artists in America."

That Walker's work is controversial is the writer's announcement of the story's focus. The writer anticipates the reader's questions: Why is she popular? Why is she controversial? What is the link between her popularity and the controversy over her work? The article that follows explores this assertion with illustrations, anecdotes, character-in-action scenes, explanation, and expert testimony.

You will read more about nut grafs and how to integrate them into your profile in the next section on "Order."

Practice

Find three profiles published in newspapers or magazines. For each, identify and underline the nut graf. If you don't find a nut graf directly after the lead, see where else it might be placed. For each nut graf you identify, comment on how well you think it presents the profile's focus. Explain your reasoning.

Order

One of the most useful ways to think about structure—especially for a complex piece of writing like the profile—is to think of your reader. Instead of focusing on what you are trying to communicate, if you shift your perspective to what your reader is trying to understand, sometimes solutions to organizational problems become clearer.

The purpose of structure in writing is, in part, to set up expectations for your readers and provide a path for them to follow. Writing teacher and journalist Don Murray writes, "Readers should be drawn into a piece of writing so they will follow a trail that leads to meaning. The writer must create a path of continual seduction that keeps readers interested and eventually satisfy them." (*The Craft of Revision*, Harcourt Brace, 1995, 128)

So, in considering how to structure your profile, think of your reader and the questions your reader will have about your topic. Murray suggests that most writing can be conceived as a

... conversation with a reader who interrupts to say:
How come?
How do you know that?

Says who?
I don't get it.
What do you mean?
I'd like to know more about that...
Why'd she do that?
Tell me more...
Stop. Enough already.
Get to the point.
Whoa. Back up, I don't understand..."

So, with your reader firmly in mind, let's consider the overall structure of a profile: the lead, the nut graf, the body, and the conclusion.

The Lead

Profiles have to hook their readers' attention immediately. Unlike a news story, however, a profile writer has more time to engage a reader through artful writing. The opening paragraphs don't have to churn out the hard news, the who-what-when-where information, but can spend some time piquing the reader's curiosity.

Three often-used and effective profile leads are:

- Narrative (beginning with a scene)
- Anecdotal (beginning with a small, complete story)
- Generalization (beginning with a statement, fact or piece of research)

Narrative Lead

Narrative leads allow for many options. You can start with a description of a setting, grounding the story in a specific locale. Or you can introduce a character through physical description or by putting the character in action. Another choice is to start with a strong quotation, a piece of dialogue.

No matter what narrative technique you use, starting a profile with telling details and vivid description puts your reader directly in the scene. Below is a narrative lead from a profile of a gubernatorial candidate who is recovering from cancer:

November 7, 2000: At the Holiday Inn in Bismark, N.D., Heidi Heitkamp, the Democratic candidate for governor, charges to the podium, her trademark mane of red hair moussed into submission. Heitkamp, 45, is big, beautiful and lit up from the inside. The election results aren't all in, but she appears jubilant.

"Isn't this a wild ride?" she shouts to the cheering crowd. As she speaks, she pummels the air with her right fist—the one sign that something about this campaign is different.

The fist is grotesquely swollen, each finger a sausage, with no break between wrist and forearm. It's the telltale sign of lymphedema, the fluid retention that may occur after losing the lymph nodes. And it is the only evidence that six weeks earlier, Heitkamp had her right breast and 18 cancerous nodes removed—the only hint that she is fighting not just for her career, but for her life.

(“Running for Life” by Judith Newman from *Self*, reprinted in *Readers' Digest*, October 2001)

Anecdotal Lead

As its name implies, an anecdotal lead hooks a reader by telling a brief but complete story. To work well, the story must shed some light on the profile subject and allow the reader some insight into the character. See if this lead for a profile about a Chinese student activist works for you.

China's Cultural Revolution was in full force in 1968, when Shen Tong was born. His grandparents had been among its first victims; when his grandfather openly criticized the village mayor, he and his wife became targets for the Red Guards. The day before they were to be paraded through their village in dunce caps, they hanged themselves from their bamboo bed frame.

(The Long Journey Home” by Midge Raymond, *Bostonia*, Fall 1999)

Generalization Lead

Many profiles begin with a generalization. (A generalization is, of course, an umbrella statement like the one that began this paragraph.) Here's how Kelly Horan Jones uses a generalization lead to open her profile of a Vietnamese noodle restaurant owner.

Tonight, an artist in Allston will eat tripe. On Newbury Street, a weary shopper will eat beef tendon. And in Harvard Square, students and parents and the odd out-of-towner will slurp their way through a selection of intensely flavored and very inexpensive noodle soups they'd probably never heard of just two years ago.

(from “The Quietist Mogul,” by Kelly Horan Jones, the *Boston Phoenix*, 1998)

You can experiment with different kinds of leads for different kinds of writing. Just keep in mind that the purpose of the lead is to pull the reader into the story both through artful writing and by introducing the main ideas of the story. You can accomplish those aims in many more creative and interesting ways than are possible to list.

The Nut Graf

Once your reader has a path into the story, you can announce your angle in the nut graf, which, as discussed earlier, is the paragraph that usually comes after the lead and announces the focus of the profile.

The nut graf stems from your analysis of your subject. After all your research is done, after you've spoken to all your sources, observed and interviewed your subject, and researched the field or background of the story, you should have a pretty good idea of what point you want to make in the profile.

Often the angle resides at the point of conflict in the story: a prize-winning marathon runner who overcame a physical handicap is one example. The story of a successful writer and artist who had been dismissed as a youthful failure (Dr. Seuss) is another.

In the narrative lead about Heidi Heitkamp, the nut is included in the phrase "...the only hint that she is fighting not just for her career, but for her life." Heitkamp's story flows from that point; it is one of overcoming physical obstacles, her illness and its complications, on her way to political office.

Shen Tong's story, set in post-Cultural Revolution China, poses the question: Now exiled from China for being a dedicated political activist, will he ever get to go home? The nut graf in this profile reads, "A leader of the 1989 student movement in China that culminated in Tiananmen Square, Shen Tong... fled Beijing in the aftermath of the massacre. Still in exile ten years later, he continues the struggle for democracy in a China he hopes will one day welcome him back."

The opening of a profile provides the map for the rest of the story. In the opening, the lead and nut, you give the reader a good sense of where you are headed, your destination in your profile. That destination is the interpretation of your subject. You will spend the rest of the article leading your reader through a reasoned explanation for your theory, or answer to the question you pose in your nut.

The Body of the Profile

Since you are juggling research from many sources and working on a longer, more complicated piece of writing, organizing the body of the profile is challenging—and important. When you've completed your research and are ready to write the middle section of your paper, you will most likely have a sheaf of notes filled with quotations, observations, and information from interviews and from print and electronic sources.

How to organize this material? As with all your writing, the organization stems from the focus of your piece. Once you've figured out what the "point" of your profile is, you can start making decisions about structure.

Your first step is to figure out a logical pattern of development that stems from your nut graf. If you've asked a question in the nut, then answering that question in a logical sequence makes sense. If you've made a provocative assertion, then you might build a structure that systematically proves your point, putting your strongest arguments toward the end of the piece. No matter what structure you use, you should generate a list of main topics, major points you plan to address in the profile.

An outline, list, or any other organizational scheme is key at this stage of your writing to help you put your main points into a coherent order. Remember that an outline is an organizational guide, not an inflexible document. As you come up with new ideas or decide that some ideas have to be trashed, revise your thinking—and your outline.

Some writers use elaborate color schemes or put sequential numbers on their notes that correspond to the topic number in the outline. Others, for long projects, create folders for each main topic and sort their research into the appropriate folder. Do whatever works best for you to organize your material into topics and put the supporting evidence with the appropriate topic.

Undoubtedly, if you have done your research well, you will have more material than you can use in your profile. Though it's good to have a lot of material to choose from, don't force material into your profile unless it fits. Think of the "extra" material as adding to your knowledge and authority on the topic. Even if it doesn't appear in the piece, the material will inform your voice and enhance your credibility.

Narration and Exposition: One Organizational Model

Since profiles come in so many shapes and sizes, it's difficult to suggest one way that fits all. However, one time-tested strategy is to weave a narrative thread into the expository fabric of a profile. Not all profiles use narration, but it is a powerful technique to engage your reader, give a sense of immediacy to your piece, and show the specific details that reveal the "universal truth." The narrative thread, the story line, can also present a unifying theme or angle for your story that will serve as its spine.

Once you engage your reader in the narrative, then you can interrupt the flow and fill in the necessary background information, the exposition. Here's where you present the quotations from experts, the facts and statistics that provide background and give depth to your profile. Remember, of course, to return to the narrative at well-paced intervals, to keep your reader interested and to complete the story.

Let's say, for example, that you are writing a profile of the high-school teacher who takes on the role of various historical figures to get his students involved in a particular era. You go to his Civil War-era lecture, and he enters dressed as Abe Lincoln. Your lead paragraph could set this scene. The lead would be full of color—details, physical description of the teacher in beard and top hat and of the students' responses, snippets of his opening remarks, and maybe snapshots of students' reactions.

The profile could proceed this way: intermixing the narrative of the day you observed the class with the expository material that explains the rationale for, reactions to, and success of this type of teaching. Here's where you present your research on facts and statistics to reveal the big picture. What are the success rates nation-wide of teaching through living history rather than traditional methods? What evidence have you discovered of the success of this method? You could also bring in the teacher's background, what prompted him to become a teacher—what training he had to be an actor—for example, how he merged the two.

By the end of the body of your profile, you should have proved your thesis—paid off your nut graf—as comprehensively as possible. Your reader should be

convinced that the history teacher is brilliant or misguided or a fraud—whatever assertion you've articulated in your nut graf.

The Conclusion

If you've proved your assertion well in the body of the paper, you don't have to repeat it in the conclusion. In fact, the best conclusion in a profile is an image or a quotation that leaves a final impression on the reader, an impression that reminds the reader of your focus. In the following profile, "Top Drill Instructor in Boot Camp 101," the writer returns to the scene that starts the profile. The writer here uses the narrative as a frame—beginning and ending in the same setting. This is a common literary device. It's a good way to exit the profile, by leaving the reader with a picture and a final impression of your subject

Practice

Look carefully at the way the author of the following profile interweaves narrative and expository information.

The Top Drill Instructor in Boot Camp 101

By Jack Falla

The bullwhip lay on the bookcase, coiled around its wooden handle like a snake around its rattle.

I was in the second-floor office of associate professor Gerald Powers at Boston University's College of Communication. A student carrying a sheaf of papers had slunk away from Power's desk as I entered, "REWRITE" scrawled across the top paper in red pencil. The whip had struck again.

"Not my day to be popular," said Powers rising from his chair to shake hands. He is a slight man, perhaps 5 feet 9, with close-cropped graying hair, and a reserved, somewhat bemused manner.

"At least you spared him the stamp," I said, nodding toward the open door. We could hear the retreating student's footsteps in the hall.

"Oh, I still have it," said Powers, smiling for the first time and opening his desk drawer to take out a rubber stamp that says REWRITE in block letters. "And I have the other one at home."

The other stamp is even more succinct; it simply reads BULLSHIT.

The stamps and Powers willingness to use them on students' papers are two of the reasons he carries the reputation that inevitable falls upon one faculty member at every college in the world: toughest sumbitch on campus. Powers is one of those professors from whom hordes of students recoil at preregistration, choosing instead to slink over to the "twinkies" courses. Yet, somehow the sumbitches manage to endure.

For 20 years, Powers has taught various writing courses within BU's Public Relations Department. And for 20 years he has ritualistically slain compromise in the first minute of the first class. His usual greeting:

"Deadlines are immovable. Meet them if it kills you. The only excuse for failing to turn in a paper on time is a death in the family. In which case," he adds, "I prefer that the death be yours."

Neal Boudette, a recent survivor of a Powers class, recalls another intimidating tactic: "one day Powers opened his briefcase in class and took out that whip. He said, 'This is a gift from former students. They thought it symbolized the way I work.' I said to myself, 'This man is a lunatic. He uses terror to teach.'"

"I try to set the tone early, says Powers, describing his First-Day-of-Class Grand-Entrance Fantasy. "I think I should enter the class ahead of a train of graduate assistants carrying my briefcase and books, backed up by an orchestra playing the march from Verdi's *Aida*."

That would certainly get the class's attention, I agreed.

It is also a day-one ritual for Powers to tell his students that almost every assignment will have to be rewritten—twice. At which point some unfortunate will inevitably raise his hand and ask, "What if you do it right the first time?"

"Humor me," he will say.

"I think students take his classes as some kind of self-flagellation," says BU grad Denise Graveline. "They know Powers' reputation, and they want to see if they can meet the challenge."

Meeting the challenge takes a strong self-image on the students' part, because Powers, like many professors of the hard-line persuasion, can be brutal in class.

For example, one student began an editorial with, "In this modern world of ours today. . . ." Powers read it aloud. "Nice lead," he said, then commented, "if we don't count its being dull, pointless and triply redundant."

Then there was the now-famous classroom argument between Powers and a student who tried playing hardball in defense of his use of the alleged word "irregardless."

"Not a proper word," said Powers."

"It's in the dictionary," yelled the student, who then has the temerity and monumental bad judgment to charge to the front of the room and bang his *Webster's* down on the table.

"My dear boy," said Powers, picking up the dictionary and sliding into what he calls his full William F. Buckley, "let us read the definition. 'Irregardless: illiterate use of the word regardless.'"

Powers' students routinely receive graded papers bearing so much read penciling that it looks as though Powers has bled on them.

"Nice typing. Horrible writing" is a frequent comment in the river of red. And to a student who once argued that good layout photos would help "carry his story," Powers replied, "Illustrating that story would be like perfuming a pig."

"He demeaned us," says former Powers student Bob Hughes, "until most of us rose above ourselves in the effort to prove we were better than he gave us credit for being."

No one escapes Powers' sarcasm. A graduate assistant once gave a lecture while Powers observed from the back of the room. The students were less than animated, prompting the grad assistant to say with forced good humor, "Professor Powers, is there something you can do to wake up the class?"

"Begging your pardon," replied Powers, "I wasn't the one who put them to sleep." And to a student who was considering a freelance writing career, Powers advised, "An excellent idea, particularly if you had the foresight to be born the daughter of a railway magnate."

Three or four weeks into each term, the school's advising center begins to resemble a refugee processing station with students in dazed or indignant retreat from Powers' thermonuclear teaching.

"Students would come in crying 'mental abuse' or 'I can't take it in there,'" says BU grad Maryellen Kennedy who observed these semiannual crises during four years of working in the advising center. "A lot of people transfer to other courses, but all that does is add to the Powers mystique."

"Students genuinely fear him," adds Graveline.

But, like other sumbitches from the football field to the physics lab, Powers claims he doesn't care.

"I'm an elitist," he says, pointing out that his teaching methods derive from the classical private-school tradition as he experienced it at Boston Latin, St. Sebastian's, and Harvard.

"I divide student into four categories," he says. "First are those I actively detest. The brownosers, grade grubbers, and B.S. artists. Then there are what I call the Rimless Ciphers. They're neuter. They occupy space. I'm neither for then now against them. The largest group is made up of pleasant, nice people. I have great empathy for students in this small group—the select and gifted few—the ones you never forget."

Powers may be harder on his protégés, however, than on any of his other students. I recall one of the chosen, a senior who had done well in two of Powers' courses and who was suddenly doing poorly after going through that most painful of undergraduate crises: Breaking Up with the Girlfriend. There were some of us who feared for the young man's emotional stability. Powers was not among us.

"Do you know what Robert Frost once said was all he knew about life?" Powers said to the student. "'It goes on.' When you come into this class you leave your personal problems outside."

Yet Powers has a single overwhelmingly redeeming feature that he probably shares with a good many other campus SOB's. He will go the mat for his students.

Kennedy describes a typical scene at the student advising center: "The reception room would be crowded with students waiting to see advisers, and suddenly Powers would burst in with a student in tow. Immediately, Powers' student would become the best kind with the most pressing problem in the entire university. Powers would have to get him into this course or out of that course, and it would have to be done that minute. Sometimes Powers would just bypass everyone and go charging into a dean's office."

"When alumni return to school, the one name you hear most often is Powers," says Graveline. "The message is usually 'If you can get through Powers' courses—and put up with him telling you to straighten your tie and shine the back of your shoes—you can probably survive the transition from campus to the world of work.'"

Powers readily admits that he is more concerned with his students' job search than with their paper chase. Each year he places dozens of students in high-paying internships with such corporate giants as Ford, Alcoa, and General Electric. He sends these former

waitresses and lifeguards away in May with the admonition, “Screw up and you’ll answer to your boss this summer and to me next fall.”

But Powers’ students—those who survive, that is—don’t often screw up. And as much as they may curse his name as they’re plowing through yet another endless rewrite, a large percentage will someday look back and realize that he was the one professor who made a difference in their lives.

I lifted the bullwhip off the bookcase and let it uncoil on the floor.

“So why do you keep teaching?” I asked.

“Same reason most of the other SOB’s in this profession do it,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “I do it for the money.”

I put the bullwhip back on the shelf. We went to lunch. I bought.

(This piece is slightly adapted, with the author’s permission, from a version with the same title published in August/September 1984 in *Campus Voice*.)

‘ Use your understanding of the elements of a profile and annotate The Toughest Drill Instructor in Boot Camp 101 .”

1. Identify the nut graf.
2. Identify the type of lead in the profile. Find examples of :
 - a. narrative
 - b. exposition
3. Find places the writer refers back to the nut graf, repeating or slightly varying the language .
4. Look carefully at the way the pieces of this profile are linked together. Underline any transitions, or transitional devices, used.
5. Circle the sources the first time the writer uses them in this profile.
6. A white space indicates that the profile is divided into two main sections. With this in mind, in the margin write the main points of the profile. Note the main point in Section 1 and the main point in Section 2. Do a margin outline—note the main point in each paragraph.

Write

Using “I”

Sometimes profile writers are characters in their own stories. But it’s a good idea not to invite yourself into somebody else’s story unless there is a good reason to be there. Don’t allow yourself to have a role in the profile simply to be the one who asks the questions. If you are using yourself as a transitional device, a link between

chunks of information or anecdotes (“Why did you leave your successful career in business to become a teacher?” I asked him next), consider cutting yourself out. (Monroe left his successful career in business to “follow a voice I heard every morning just as I was waking up,” he says. “The voice always said the same thing, and I tried really hard not to hear it.”)

Sometimes writers have good reasons to be in the story. The profile of the toughest professor on campus was written by the professor’s former student. In that case, the writer was a good eyewitness. He saw the subject over time and gathered many anecdotes from personal observation that he couldn’t have gathered any other way.

A writer for the *New York Times*, Darcy Frey traveled to the North Pole to spend time with a scientist who tracks bird populations. She includes herself in her narrative about building a fence so polar bears couldn’t eat the two of them “down to the toenail.” She would have mislead her readers if she hadn’t included herself since most of the time the scientist spends his three months at the North Pole alone. Also, since the scientist is so used to the Arctic conditions, Frey’s can better explain the experience of the cold, harsh climate from her own point-of-view. The choice to include herself in the story was a good one.

You should assume you won’t be in the story unless the circumstances of the reporting—your intimate knowledge of the details of the story, for example—need some clarification. Always remember that the spotlight is your on your subject, not on you.

Metaphor

Metaphor, comparing two seemingly unlike things, can help encapsulate your interpretation of the profile subject into a concrete image. Metaphor, or metaphorical language is important to poets who want the economy of few words, without sacrificing any meaning. Profile writers can use metaphors in the same way—making a concept into a concise, memorable image.

Metaphorical language can be used in a single sentence to make an isolated point (“The lawyer walked into the minefield of the courtroom”), or a metaphor can be extended throughout the profile, becoming a symbol the reader associates with a character.

For example, in “The Toughest Drill Instructor in Boot Camp 101,” Jack Falla uses the image of the whip in the lead and refers to it several times in the profile. In describing the comments on the student paper, Falla writes, “The whip had struck again.” Later in the piece, Falla refers to the whip again, this time mentioning that former students gave it to Powers as a gift, a symbol of the way he teaches. The whip becomes an extended metaphor for Powers, and it represents his personality and his teaching style. An ex-student offers up his interpretation of the whip, saying that to him the whip means Powers uses force, “intimidation,” to teach.

Likewise, in a profile about Marilyn DiSilva, the girlfriend of a mobster, the writer uses an image to sum up the essence of DiSilva’s character. DiSilva was involved with a group of mobsters who are suspected of killing at least three dozen people, girlfriends included in the body count. Here, the writer describes DiSilva

navigating unscathed among stingrays on a Florida beach, a good metaphor for her ability to survive in the mob underworld.

It's easy to spot the limping beachgoers who have suffered the excruciating jab of a venom-laced barb; getting zapped by a stingray is almost a rite of passage here.

Yet, Marilyn DiSilva is one of the few people who have been able to wade among the rays without ever being stung. In a way, her whole life has been like that; she always seemed to make her way through hazards unscathed."

(from "Dangerous Liaisons" by Ralph Ranalli, in *The Boston Globe Magazine*, November 19, 2000)

Practice

1. Create a metaphor for one of the following activities:

- Asking somebody out on a date
- Buying a new computer
- Doing your income taxes
- Shaving
- Performing a perfect dive
- Making a free shot
- Driving through traffic

2. Create a metaphor for a person you see often: a bus driver, a cafeteria worker, the secretary in your office, a security guard, your dog-walking neighbor. Use your metaphor to reveal something essential about your impression of this character.

Readings

The Lion in Waiting by Susan Burton

In telling the story of the orphaned son of an Afghan leader, the writer makes comparisons to the Kennedy family, an analogy most Americans can easily understand. In this reading, the 16-year-old subject, Abdul Majeed Arsala, is caught at a moment of transition, just after his father's assassination, at the beginning of a new Afghanistan. The question for him and the reader is: Will he join the family business?



n the day his father died, 16-year-old Abdul Majeed Arsala emerged from his bedroom in Union City, Calif., a little before 8. Khushal Arsala, 31, the eldest of several cousins with whom Majeed lives, looked up at him from a mat on the family's living-room floor. During the night, Khushal had learned that Majeed's father, the

Afghan war hero Abdul Haq, had been executed by the Taliban. For a moment, Khushal debated telling Majeed the horrible news. "But then I said to myself, just for the time being, he should spend a few hours away from this terrible thing."

Majeed walked his usual six blocks to James Logan High School, the large public school he has attended since moving to California from Peshawar nearly three years ago. He met his friend Samir Hasimi in the courtyard, and just before first period, the two went to the library. Samir, who was born in Kabul, sat down at an iMac to make his daily rounds of the news Web sites. "I went to the BBC, and his dad's picture was on there," Samir recalled. "It said he got executed." Samir felt Majeed approaching and quickly turned the computer off. Majeed stood behind him. "He said, 'I saw my dad's picture.' I said, 'No, that was somebody else.'"

Majeed turned on the computer and printed out the page. Samir didn't know what to do. "He looked down on the paper and his eyes began to cry. He said, 'This is probably not true.' I said, 'I hope not.'"

ABDUL HAQ WAS a Pashtun from the east, but his reputation as a warrior extended far beyond his local province. He was stout and charismatic — his countrymen called him the Afghan Lion — and became famous fighting the Soviets in the 1980's. He had commanded troops, lost his foot to a land mine, visited Margaret Thatcher in London and the Reagans at the White House. While Haq certainly had detractors who thought of him as an outspoken publicity hound, there are those who believe that had he lived, he would be leading a post-Taliban Afghanistan rather than Hamid Karzai. Even before Sept. 11, Haq had embarked upon a project to unite tribal leaders in a multiethnic coalition; once this structure was in place, he believed he could persuade moderate Taliban leaders to defect, eroding support for their regime and ultimately toppling it peacefully.

On Sunday, Oct. 21, Haq sneaked across the border from Peshawar into Afghanistan with a small band of men, including his 22-year-old nephew, to try to negotiate with the Taliban. The group carried satellite phones and a few guns, traveling by car over mountain roads to the town of Azra, near Haq's home village.

That Thursday, the Taliban ambushed Haq and his group not far from Azra. Within hours, a plea for help traveled from Haq's entourage to his Peshawar office to James Ritchie, a wealthy American who for years has supported anti-Taliban initiatives, then on to the former Reagan national security adviser Robert McFarlane and to the C.I.A. By that time, Haq had already been taken to a Taliban training camp near Kabul. There, he was hanged from a maple tree with a metal noose. His body was then shot repeatedly. It is said that the order to kill Haq came directly from Mullah Omar himself; later, Haq's nephew was executed, too.

HAQ'S IS A PROMINENT Pashtun family with a political tradition stretching from the 19th century to the present. Among his seven brothers are Hajji Din Mohammad, who served as a deputy prime minister before the Taliban regime, and Hajji Abdul Qadir, a member of the interim administration.

Majeed and his cousins living in Union City are not unlike young Kennedys. They are the next generation, still mourning their glamorous fathers, three of whom have died in public service. But they are Kennedys miles away from home who long ago saw the Hyannisport compound crumble on TV.

Union City is one of several towns south of Oakland that are home to the nation's largest Afghan population, most of whom arrived in the early 80's after the Soviet invasion. Majeed lives in a ranch house on one of the town's older streets. A Lincoln Town Car stretches nearly the

length of the short driveway. In the days after Abdul Haq's death, the house grew so crowded that the family rolled rugs across the concrete garage so visitors could gather out there.

Memorial services for Haq were held in cities from Atlanta to Rome. In Kabul, where family members brought Haq's body, mourners removed the cloth covering his face and cried, "You left us alone."

He is one of the few leaders, most agree, who could have united the seemingly irreconcilable forces in Afghanistan. "If he were alive," says Sayed Masood Majrooh, a former journalist from Peshawar now living in nearby Fremont, "the situation in Tora Bora and the eastern province would not be the same. He could have brought civility. Hamid Karzai is a good friend of mine, and maybe I will leave soon, present myself and say, 'What can I do for you?' But Karzai is a political person. Abdul Haq was a commander. He had the confidence of the intellectuals and the tribal people too."

Khushal agrees emphatically: "His charisma would have made it easier. But that charisma in Abdul Haq is difficult to find in anyone else."

Except, perhaps, in one person. "I know he has the same ability of his father," Majrooh says of Majeed, Haq's oldest son. "He gets something from him. When he is speaking, I can feel it."

One afternoon at home, Khushal points at Majeed, sitting on a chair across the room, twitching his bare foot. "You see his leg?" Khushal cries. "Abdul Haq, he lost his right foot, so his leg was always giving him a lot of pain. He was always moving it, shaking it." Khushal gestures at Majeed's cuffed-up jeans.

"Even though his foot is there, he moves it. It was the habit he saw in his father." Majeed crosses his ankles and solemnly fixes his face. Khushal sighs. "Now I call him my little uncle. I see the signs in him. If I miss Abdul Haq, I just look at him."

Majeed speaks Pashto with his family and Urdu with his best friends; with others, he uses Standard American Teenage English: "That's totally O.K." and "I have no clue." If you walk around town with him, he takes a certain amount of glee in announcing, "I am sorry, but I think we are going to have to do a little jaywalking." He is formal, but without the extra-starch quality of a foreign student.

One day after school, Majeed tells me how he came to live here. He was born in Peshawar and grew up in a large family compound. He saw his father on his breaks from battle, when the house would fill with dozens of mujahedeen commanders and journalists. After the war, the family shuttled among different houses for safety reasons, a strategy that ultimately failed.

One night while Haq was away, Majeed and his mother and his five younger siblings came home late from the bazaar. "It was Jan. 11, 1999, that terrible day," Majeed remembers. "I was 14 years old. It was Ramadan. We were tired, so we lay down on the floor downstairs. At 3 o'clock in the morning, these people came. Some say they were secret police of the Taliban. They wanted to kill my father. They cut off the electricity, the telephone lines. First, they killed our bodyguard. Then they entered the house.

"It was totally dark. But it was winter, so there was a little bit of light from the gas heater shining on my mother and brother. The men came inside and saw that somebody was lying down. They started shooting. I woke up. I ran after one of them. I saw his back, just his back. I didn't see his face. If I had a weapon, I could have shot

him. But I couldn't do anything. My brothers and sister saw what they did to our family. They saw their mother's body. They have their memory of what happened."

Majeed narrates these events with such remove that it seems they must have happened very long ago. It is as if, somehow, he is younger now than he was then, that the airplane that brought him to America was in fact a time machine.

Two months after his mother and 11-year-old brother were killed, Majeed's father sent him to the United States. He went from his 15th birthday party straight to the airport. Khushal Arsala and his brothers received him in San Francisco. It had been six years since the cousins had seen each other. "They had beards," Majeed says. "And some of them had lost their hair. They were in their 20's, like old guys."

Majeed waited several weeks before starting school. His cousin had an extra laptop, which Majeed appropriated. "I was doing the Internet for like 10 or 12 hours every day, like until midnight," he says. "I kind of backed off from that."

Now Majeed goes straight to the media center every day after school to do his homework. He says he likes history best, amendments and artillery and ancient things. He is always scanning newspapers. "The talks at Bonn are going well," Majeed reports one day after school as we drive past the football field. Then he looks out the window and points to a bunch of boys in shiny red shorts. "Those are soccer players here to compete with the Logan team, the Colts."

WHILE IT WAS Abdul Haq's dream that Majeed receive an education in America, he did not want him to stay. The understanding was always that he would return one day. Majeed had traveled through Afghanistan twice with his father; there he saw teenagers holding AK-47s. "If I lived there, I wouldn't know how to spell my name," he says. "The only thing is to pull triggers."

For 22 years, people in Afghanistan did not work or go to school, says Rona Popal, an activist who is organizing an effort to send educated Afghans back to their country to help rebuild. Majeed is better suited to the task than most. "I thought maybe he was going to have a psychological breakdown," Popal said after she saw Majeed at a local memorial service for Haq. "First they kill your mother; now they kill your father. But his relatives told me that he comforts others. A 16-year-old? He's strong. He has the genes of his father. I pray for him to go back."

Majeed tells me that the interim government does not have enough of an ethnic balance — "The Pashtuns don't want the Northern Alliance to rule them. If this goes on, there will be another civil war" — and he thinks that the U.S. bombing campaign to root out Osama bin Laden has not

been worth the costs. "The bombs just hurt civilians. They should let the mujahedeen do their thing. Bin Laden is very clever. He won't be there waiting for the daisy cutter."

In December, Majeed sat in on a dinner Khushal hosted for Abdul Haq's brother Nasrullah Baryalai Arsala, who is helping the Eastern Shura prepare for the *loya jirga* — a Pashto phrase meaning "grand council" — and the future elections. The large group of guests included a doctor who had treated the royal family, lawyers, engineers and the former journalist Masood Majrooh.

Over dumplings and chicken, the guests voiced their support for United Nations peace-keeping forces. They demanded broader representation and urged Nasrullah and his brother Abdul Qadir to cooperate with the Northern Alliance. Nasrullah took notes and promised to deliver the exiles' advice.

Majeed and Khushal enjoy direct access to power via the prepaid phone cards they use to call their relatives in Peshawar and Jalalabad. "They can help the people through their uncle," Majrooh says. "They give him good advice."

That night, however, Majeed listened from a corner. "The elders talk; the little ones listen," he explains. Khushal was glad to see Majeed so focused: "When he first came here, he was not that interested. That was why Abdul Haq sent him. When my uncle was alive, I said: 'Your father has a vision for Afghanistan. If something happens to him, you should keep his vision — you should follow in his footsteps. So sit with the elders; be aware of the situation.' And you know, he improved. He understands his responsibility. It was the dream of his father that first he should get his education here in America. I tell him, you are the hope."

As we stand before a poster of a young, wild-maned Abdul Haq, Majeed says, firmly, "I will be fulfilling his dream soon." For now, though, he seems grateful to be spending this year in a carpeted house on a calm street. "When he was 16, he struggled to bring peace and get rid of Communism," he says. "That was back like decades ago. In this generation, a 16-year-old boy just goes to high school and enjoys life."

MAJEED HAS THREE best friends: Samir, Nobel and Sarfraz. Samir is the flirt. Nobel, who writes Urdu poetry, is the intellectual. Sarfraz, they call the mullah, because he has a beard. And Majeed is the funny one, the one who plays the lady in distress when they make movies with Sarfraz's video camera. They all play cricket on the Union City Extreme, and the jewel of their world is the Union Landing, a mammoth retail complex. "We have everything — Chili's, Applebee's, Starbucks, Jollibees, Jamba Juice," Majeed ticks them off. "You should really try an In-N-Out Burger."

One day in their school cafeteria, Majeed and Samir point to a table of Afghan girls near the Good Humor machine. Among them is Gezala Popal, 17, who moved to Union City when she was 4. Until now, almost no one at school knew about Majeed's famous father, including his fellow Afghans. "Some of the girls were like, 'That's his son, right there,'" Gezala says. "And I was like, 'Oh, my God, his son goes to our school?' It was unbelievable."

After lunch, Majeed, Samir and I visit the media center so that I can see a display of clippings about Abdul Haq and Majeed. But when we arrive, Majeed seems not to want to approach the display case. He points at it, then turns his back and picks up a newspaper. Samir walks me over instead. Since his father's death, Majeed has become more quiet at school, serious and stiff. He says that his mind drifts to his father during classes. He seems more comfortable at home late at night, "watching Ashleigh" on MSNBC and dissecting the day's news with his cousins.

Khushal Arsala's house in Union City is like the setting for an Afghan version of "A Heart-breaking Work of Staggering Genius." There is Majeed, who has lost a brother, a mother and a father and is preparing for the arrival of his five remaining siblings; Khushal and his two younger brothers, all of whom were raised by Abdul Haq after their father was killed by the Soviets; and Wazhma, Khushal's wife, who suffers occasionally from minor seizures. "She was 10 or 11 years old when she saw her father's body full of blood," Khushal says. "Now sometimes she just falls down. And when something violent comes on TV, she starts weeping." Stories about relatives frequently include disarming details. "This was my uncle who was arrested," Khushal tells me, showing me a passport-size photo. "He was tortured. The last time my aunt saw him, his nails were not in his fingers."

But here, there is coziness and order. There are rules and dinners and children — Wazhma and Khushal have two — doing homework on the floor. There is a husband who commutes into San Francisco and a wife who drives over to the station in the evenings to pick him up. "It is like a little family," Majeed says.

One evening around 6 o'clock, Wazhma goes to get Khushal, leaving Majeed in charge of the house. He sits in front of the TV and pops samosas into his mouth like chips. When Khushal comes in, with rain on his jacket, Majeed greets him in Pashto, shakes his hand and remains standing until he leaves the room. When Khushal returns, he is wearing the *shalwar kameez*, the traditional Afghan thin pants and long collarless shirt. He came to Union City seven years ago, abandoning a promising career in the pre-Taliban government. Like many of the exiled in-

tellectuals who convene in his living room (particularly, these days, they talk about hostility toward Pashtuns), Khushal desperately hopes to play a role in shaping the future of his country, if only from afar. Khushal idolized Abdul Haq, and the fact that Haq picked him to watch over Majeed is clearly a great honor.

As Khushal reads from newspaper clippings about Haq, Majeed and another cousin sit on the Oriental rug, their heads tilted toward the big TV, flipping channels. Periodically one cries out in Pashto, turns up the volume on CNN and Khushal explains that we are seeing a relative: the cousin who is engaged to the son of former King Zahir Shah, or another time, their Uncle Abdul Qadir negotiating at Bonn.

"After trying to escape up a steep mountain trail, the Taliban captured him," Khushal reads, his voice rising and his words tripping over each other. "Condemned to death for being a spy, he was hanged and his body was riddled with bullets before being thrown out on a street."

As Khushal reads this, Majeed flips past "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" the WB, C-Span, holding the remote control in the ready position, before settling on the Discovery Channel. He bangs his fist against his leg.

One afternoon, I ask Majeed if he ever looks at reports of his father's death. He blushes. "I just went an hour ago to Yahoo.com and searched for my father's name. Now I am feeling better. I'm looking for details about what happened." Those details, no doubt, include intimations that Abdul Haq's mission was foolhardy. Before I can finish asking Majeed about this, he jumps in. It is a point that he has debated before: "Somebody said that he was a great man, so how could he make this kind of mistake? But he went to his own village. He was thinking he was safe there. He's experienced like 22 years of war. But some of his own people betrayed him. And soon it will be revealed who those people were."

ON FRIDAY AFTER SCHOOL, Majeed takes a nap, breaks the fast, goes to mosque, then comes home and starts making telephone calls. "Behind Enemy Lines," a movie about an American pilot shot down by Serbs, is showing at the Century 25. The theater has stadium seating, and Majeed bounds up to the top row. Everyone is excited about the movie, which is supposed to have cool espionage stuff. They want to be spies. "We have language skills, Pashto, Farsi, Urdu," Majeed says. Majeed asks if I have heard today's news, that his Uncle Abdul Qadir walked out of the Bonn talks. He is animated, leaning forward into the row: "He thought that the Pashtuns were not being represented enough. This is a good thing, that he walked out." (Qadir was later persuaded to return.) The theater darkens, and a

preview comes up. "No politics, time for the movie!" Sarfraz pleads.

On screen, an American pilot lands in enemy territory. He is alone, pursued by angry Serbs who want him dead. As he makes increasingly desperate calls from his radio, it is hard not to wonder what Majeed, sunk back into his seat in his leather jacket, thinks of all this.

Afterward, we file out of the theater and stand on the sidewalk, slick with rain. The parking lot is empty. Chili's and Fuddruckers have shut their doors for the night. Majeed and his friends pat each other on the back and walk to their cars. Tomorrow is Saturday, so they can sleep in.

When I ask Majeed for his opinion of the film, he says, "I like this kind of adventure movie." When I ask more pointedly if it was hard to watch something with so many parallels to his father's story, he says simply, "I have heard more bad things than these kind of things."

Only once, right after his father died, did Majeed cry: "I was disturbed. But one of my family members said there is no solution from crying. If that could make them come back, the whole family would be crying." He pauses, wanting, it seems, to prove he has conquered the past and steeled himself for the future. "Some say that God likes people to see their strength, so he gives problems to them, takes away their mother and father. These days, I am doing well with this test that was given to me." ■

Talking Points

1. Why do you think the writer delayed the story with so much background about who Abdul Haq is and how he died? Explain why you think this is or is not an effective technique.
2. What is the focus of this profile? Where do you find the focus announced?
3. What do you think of the claim that Majeed "has the same ability as his father," made by journalist Masood Majrooh? Do you see evidence of Majeed's promise as a leader in this profile?
4. The writer has included many scenes showing Majeed doing ordinary things—channel surfing, walking down the street. How do these ordinary activities affect your understanding of his character?
5. What is the purpose of showing Majeed's friends? Why are they included in the profile?
6. Find some of Majeed's direct quotations in the story. What does any one or several imply about him that the writer does not overtly state?

Shoot the Moon by Susan Orlean

One of the most well-known practitioners of “literary journalism,” non-fiction that relies on the techniques novelists use to tell stories, Susan Orlean has published three non-fiction books as well as articles in *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue*, *Esquire*, and *The New Yorker*. In an interview at the University of Oregon, which follows this profile, she talks about her interest in “ordinary people stories”: After doing celebrity journalism, I realized I was more interested in the things I walked past every day, the stuff people usually miss. I’m primarily interested in the tiny master—a person with a tiny domain over which they are the master.” In the following profile, Orlean carefully observes Felipe, who is the master of high-school basketball—for the moment, anyway.



WHITE MEN IN SUITS FOLLOW FELIPE LOPEZ everywhere he goes. Felipe lives in Mott Haven, in the South Bronx. He is a junior at Rice High School, which is on the corner of 124th Street and Lenox Avenue, in Harlem, and he plays guard for the school basketball team, the Rice Raiders. The white men are ubiquitous. They rarely miss one of Felipe’s games or tournaments. They have absolute recall of his best minutes of play. They are authorities on his physical condition. They admire his feet, which are big and pontoon-shaped, and his wrists, which have a loose, silky motion. Not long ago, I sat with the white men at a game between Rice and All Hallows High School. My halftime entertainment was listening to a debate between two of them—a college scout and a Westchester contractor who is a high school basketball fan—about whether Felipe had grown a half inch over Christmas break. “I know this kid,” the scout said as the second half started. “A half inch is not something I would miss.” The white men believe that Felipe is the best high school basketball player in the country. They often compare him

turns out to be true. He is actually the sweetest person I know. At some point during our time together, it occurred to me that he could be a great basketball hustler, because he seems naïve and eager—the ideal personality for attracting competitive big shots on the basketball court. It happens that he is not the least bit of a hustler. But he is also not nearly as naïve and eager as he appears. He once told me that he likes to make people think of him as a clown, because then they will never accuse him of being a snob. He also said that he likes to be friendly to everyone, so that no one will realize he's figuring out whom he can trust.

Felipe spoke no English at all when he moved to New York from the Dominican Republic, four years ago, but he quickly picked up certain phrases, including “crash the boards,” “he’s bugging out,” “get the hell out of the paint,” and “oh, my goodness.” Now he speaks English comfortably, with a rich Dominican accent—the words tumble and click together, like stones being tossed in a polisher. “Oh, my goodness” remains his favorite phrase. It is a utility expression that reveals his modesty, his manners, his ingenuousness, and his usual state of mind, which is one of pleasant and guileless surprise at the remarkable nature of his life. I have heard him use it to comment on the expectation that he will someday be a rich and famous player in the NBA, and on the fact that he was recently offered half a million dollars by people from Spain to put aside his homework and come play in their league, and on the fact that he is already considered a semi-national national export by citizens of the Dominican Republic, who are counting on him to be the first Dominican in the NBA, and on the fact that he is growing so fast that he once failed to recognize his own pants. Sometimes he will use the phrase in circumstances where his teammates and friends might be inclined to say something more dynamic. One night this winter, I was sitting around at school with Felipe and his teammates, watching a videotape of old Michael Jordan highlights. The tape had been edited for maximum excitement, and most of the boys on the team were responding with more and more baroque constructions of foul language. At one point, Jordan was shown leaping past the Celtics center Robert Parish, and someone said, “Yo, feature that, bro! He’s busting the Chief’s face.”

“Busting his fucking face,” another one said.

“Busting his goddam big-ass face.”

“He’s got it going on. Now Jordan’s going to bust his foul-loving big-ass mama’s-boy dope black ass.”

On the tape, Jordan slammed the ball through the hoop and Parish crumpled to the floor. While the other boys were applauding and swearing, Felipe moved closer to the television and then said, admiringly, “Oh, my goodness.”

FELIPE’S LIFE IS unusually well populated. He is very close to his family. He is named Luis Felipe, after his father. His older brother Anthony is one of the managers of the Rice High School team. Anthony is a square-shouldered, avid man of twenty-five who played amateur basketball in the Dominican Republic and in New York until his ankle was badly injured in a car accident. Until last month, when he was laid off, he worked at a Manhattan print shop and had a boss who appreciated basketball and tolerated the time Anthony spent with the team. Anthony is rarely away from Felipe’s side, and when he is there he is usually peppering him with directions and commentary in a hybrid of Spanish and English: “*Felipe, mal, muy mal! Cómo estás* you go so aggressive to a layup?” A couple of times a month, Anthony makes the rounds of Felipe’s teachers to see if his B average is holding up. “If he’s not doing well, then I go back and let my people know,” Anthony says. “It’s nice, it’s beautiful to be a superstar, but if he doesn’t work hard he doesn’t play.” Once, Felipe’s father forbade him to travel to a tournament because he had neglected to wash the dishes. This made Felipe cry, but in hindsight he is philosophical about it. “He was right,” he says. “I didn’t do my dishes.” Felipe is also close to Lou

DeMello, his coach at Rice, and to Dave Jones, his coach with the Gauchos, a basketball organization in the Bronx which he plays for during the summer, and to Louis d'Almeida, the founder of the Gauchos. Felipe says he sometimes gets basketball advice from his mother, Carmen, and from Maura Beattie, a teacher at Rice who tutors him in English. Neither of them plays. "You know what, though?" Felipe says. "They know something." His primary hobby is sleeping, but his other pastime is talking on the phone for hours to his girlfriend, who is an American, a resident of Brooklyn, and a basketball fan.

Sometimes his life seems overpopulated. He has so far received four crates of letters from college coaches and recruiters pitching woo at him. Some make seductive mention of the large seating capacities of their arenas. Basketball camp directors call regularly, saying that they would like Felipe Lopez to be in attendance. Officials of Puerto Rico's summer basketball league have requested the honor of his presence this summer. There are corporate marketing executives who would very much like to be his friends. Not everyone crowding into his life wishes him well. There are people who might wittingly or unwittingly mislead him. Felipe has been warned by his father, for example, never to have sex without a condom, because some girls who pretend to like him might really have appraised him as a lucrative paternity suit. Last year, Felipe and another player were invited to appear in a Nintendo television commercial, and the commercial nearly cost them their college athletic eligibility, because no one had warned them that accepting money for a commercial was against NCAA regulations. There are people who are jealous of Felipe. There are coaches whose hearts he has broken, because they're not at one of the colleges Felipe is interested in—Florida State, Syracuse, St. John's, Seton Hall, North Carolina, Georgia Tech, UCLA, Indiana, Arizona, Ohio State, and Kansas. There are coaches who put aside all other strategy except Keep Felipe Lopez Away from the Ball. Some opponents will go out of their way to play him hard. There are kids on his own team who have bitter moments about Felipe. And there are contrarians, who would like to get in early on a backlash and look clairvoyant and hype-resistant by declaring him, at only eighteen and only a junior in high school, already overrated. His response to all this is to be nice to everyone. I have never seen him angry, or even peeved, but when he isn't playing well his entire body droops and he looks completely downcast. It is an alarming sight, because he looks so hollowed out anyway.

"Wait till this kid gets a body," Coach DeMello likes to say. During practice, DeMello will sometimes jump up and down in front of Felipe and yell, "Felipe! Make yourself big!" The best insult I ever heard DeMello hurl at Felipe was during a practice one afternoon when Felipe was playing lazily. DeMello strode onto the court, looked up at Felipe, and said acidly, "You're six-five, but you're trapping like you're *five-eleven*." Anthony Lopez can hardly wait until Felipe gets a body, so sometimes during the off-season he will take him to the steep stairway at the 155th Street subway station, in the Bronx, and make him run up and down the hundred and thirty steps a few times to try to speed the process along. Felipe is less than crazy about this exercise, although he appreciates the advantages that more bulk might give him: "When I first came here, I could tell the guys were looking at me and thinking, Who is this skinny kid? Then they would say, 'Hey, let's—excuse my language—bust his ass.'"

Felipe's body is an unfinished piece of work. It gets people thinking. Tom Konchalski, a basketball scout who follows high schools in the Northeast, suggested recently that if Felipe ever wanted to give up basketball he

could be a world-class sprinter. Coach DeMello said to me once that, much as he hated to admit it, he thought Felipe had the perfect pitcher's body. Felipe's mother told me that even though Felipe is now a fast-break expert, she thought he should sharpen his ability to penetrate to the basket and go for the big finish—say, a windmill slam dunk. I once asked her whose style of play she wanted Felipe to emulate, and she pointed to a picture of Michael Jordan and said, in Spanish, "If he would eat more, he could be like the man who jumps."

Felipe's father, who played amateur baseball in the Dominican Republic, thought he saw in his son the outlines of a first baseman, and steered Felipe toward baseball when he was little. But Felipe was hit in the nose by a wild throw, and decided that, in spite of its popularity in the Dominican Republic and the success Dominican ballplayers have had in the United States, baseball was not his game. Maura Beattie, his English tutor, is an excellent tennis player, and one day, just for fun, she took Felipe with her to the courts. She was curious to see if someone with Felipe's build and abilities could master a racquet sport. He beat her. It was the first time he'd held a tennis racquet in his life. Another time, the two of them went to play miniature golf in Rockaway, and Felipe, who had never held a putter before, made a hole in one. Some of this prowess can be attributed to tremendous physical coordination and the biomechanical advantages of being tall and thin and limber. Felipe Lopez is certainly a born athlete. But he may also be one of those rarer cases—a person who is just born lucky, whose whole life seems an effortless conveyance of dreams, and to whom other people's dreams adhere. This aura of fortune is so powerful that it is easy to forget that for the time being, and for a while longer, Felipe Lopez is still just an immigrant teenager who lives in a scary neighborhood in the South Bronx and goes to high school in Harlem, where bad things happen every day.

Currently, there are 518,000 male high school basketball players in the United States. Of these, only 19,000 will end up on college teams—not even 4 percent. Less than 1 percent will play for Division One colleges—the most competitive. The present NBA roster has 367 players, and each year only 40 or 50 new players are drafted. What these numbers forebode is disappointment for many high school basketball players. That disappointment is disproportionate among black teenagers. A recent survey of high school students by Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society reported that 59 percent of black teenage athletes thought they would continue to play on a college team, compared with 39 percent of white teenagers. Only 16 percent of the white athletes expected that they would play for the pros; 43 percent of the blacks expected that they would, and nearly half of all the kids said they thought it would be easier for black males to become professional basketball players than to become lawyers or doctors. Scouts have told me that everyone on the Rice team will probably be able to get a free college education by playing basketball, and so far all the players have received recruiting letters from several schools. The scouts have also said that it will require uncommonly hard work for any of the boys on the team other than Felipe to ascend to the NBA.

Every so often, scouts' forecasts are wrong. Some phenomenal high school players get injured or lazy or fat or drug-addled or bored, or simply level off and then vanish from the sport, and, by the same token, a player of no particular reputation will once in a while emerge from out of nowhere and succeed. That was the case with the NBA all-stars Karl Malone and Charles Barkley, who both played through high school in obscurity; but most other NBA players were standouts starting in their early teens. Most people who follow high school basketball teams that are filled with kids from poor families and rough neighborhoods encourage the kids to put basketball in perspective, to view it not as a catapult into some fabulous, famous life but as something practical—a way to get out, to get an education, to learn the way around a different, better world. The simple fact that only one in a million people in this country will ever play for the

NBA is often pointed out to the kids, but that still doesn't seem to stop them from dreaming.

Being told that you might be that one person in a million would deform many people's characters, but it has not made Felipe cynical or overly interested in himself. In fact, his blitheness can be almost unnerving. One evening when we were together, I watched him walk past a drug deal on 125th Street and step off the curb into traffic, and then he whiled away an hour in a fast-food restaurant where several ragged, hostile people repeatedly pestered him for change. He hates getting hurt on the court, but out in the world he is not very careful with himself. When you are around him, you can't help feeling that he is a boy whose body is a savings account, and it is one that is uninsured. But being around him is also to be transported by his nonchalant confidence about luck—namely, that it happens because it happens, and that it will happen for Felipe, because things are meant to go his way. This winter, he and the Rice Raiders were in Las Vegas playing in a tournament. One evening, a few of them went into a casino and attached themselves to the slot machines. Felipe's first quarter won him a hundred quarters. Everyone told him to stop while he was ahead, but he continued. "I wanted to play," he says. "I thought, I had nothing before I started, now I have something, so I might as well play. So I put some more quarters in, and—oh, my goodness!—I won twelve hundred more quarters. What can I say?"

AT THREE O'CLOCK one afternoon this winter, I went over to the high school to watch Felipe and the Rice team practice. I hadn't met Felipe before that afternoon, but I had heard a lot about him from friends who follow high school basketball. As it happens, Felipe's reputation often precedes him. Before he moved to this country, he was living in Santiago, in the Dominican Republic. The Lopez family had been leaving the Dominican Republic in installments for thirty years. A grandmother had moved to New York in the sixties, followed by Felipe's father in 1982, and then, in 1986, by his mother and Anthony. For three years, Felipe stayed in the Dominican Republic with another older brother, Anderson, and his sister, Sayonara. At age eight, he started playing basketball in provincial leagues, sometimes being bumped up to older age-groups because he was so good. He already had a following. "I would hear from a lot of Dominicans about how good he was getting," Anthony says now. "It made me curious. When I left him in the Dominican Republic, he was just a little kid who I would boss around. He was my—you know, my delivery guy." When more visas were obtained, in 1989, Felipe and Sayonara moved to New York. Anthony took Felipe to a playground near the family's apartment and challenged him one-on-one, decided that the rumors were true, and then took him to try out for the Gauchos. Lou d'Almeida says that people were already talking about Felipe by then. Many high school coaches had intelligence on Felipe by the time he started school. Lou DeMello first saw him in a citywide tournament for junior high players. Felipe was in the Midget Division. "He looked like a man among boys," DeMello says now. "If I could have, I would have taken him then and started him *then* on the Rice varsity. I swear to God. At the time, he was in eighth grade."

Rice High School is a small all-boys Catholic school, which was founded in 1938 and is run by the Congregation of Christian Brothers. It is the only Catholic high school still open in Harlem. Currently, it has about four hundred students. Tuition is two thousand dollars a year, which many of the students can afford only with the help of scholarship money from private sponsors, including some basketball fans. At school, students have to wear a tie, real trousers, and real shoes, not sneakers. There is also a prohibition against beepers. The school is in a chunky brick building with a tiny blind entrance on 124th Street, close to some Chinese luncheonettes, some crack dealers, and some windswept vacant tenements. A lot of unregulated commerce is conducted on the sidewalks nearby, and last year a business dispute in an alley across from the school was resolved with semiautomatic weapons, but the building itself emanates gravity and

calm. Inside, it is frayed but sturdy and pleasant. There is an elevator, but it often isn't working; the gym, which occupies most of the top two floors of the school, is essentially a sixth-floor walk-up. The basketball court is only fifty-five feet long instead of the usual ninety-four, and the walls are less than a foot away from the sidelines. It would qualify as regulation-size in Lilliput. Rice has to play its games in a borrowed gym—usually the Gauchos' facility, in the Bronx.

At the time Coach DeMello first heard about Felipe Lopez, the Rice Raiders had a win-loss record of eight and thirteen, tattered ten-year-old uniforms, and an inferiority complex. Catholic League basketball in New York City is a particularly bad place for any of these. Since the early eighties, the Catholic schools in New York have had ferocious rivalries, fancy shoes and uniforms from friendly sporting goods companies, and most of the best players in the city. College teams and the NBA are loaded with New York City Catholic League alumni: Jamal Mashburn, now at Kentucky, attended Cardinal Hayes; the Nets' Kenny Anderson and the Houston Rockets' Kenny Smith went to Archbishop Molloy; the Pacers' Malik Sealy, Syracuse's Adrian Autry, and North Carolina's Brian Reese all went to St. Nicholas of Tolentine; the Pistons' Olden Polynice attended All Hallows; Chris Mullin, of Golden State, went to Xaverian; Mark Jackson, now of the Clippers, went to Bishop Loughlin. Rice had won the city Catholic school championship in 1966 and proceeded to become steadily undistinguished over the next few decades. Four years ago, Lou DeMello took over as head coach. First, he persuaded Nike—and later Reebok and Converse—to donate shoes and uniforms to the team. Then he started scouting Midget Division players who might have a future at Rice. The Gaucho coaches have a cordial relationship with DeMello and began pointing players like Felipe his way. Last year, the Rice Raiders reached the finals of the city championship. This year, they are ranked in the top twenty high schools nationally—the first time they have been ranked there for twenty-seven years.

Coach DeMello is short and trim, and has bright eyes and a big mustache and an air of uncommon intensity, like someone who is just about to sneeze. His usual attire consists of nylon warm-up suits that are very generously sized. The first time I saw him in street clothes, he looked as if someone had let his air out. He speaks with a New York accent, but in fact he was born in Brazil, and played soccer there. His motivational specialty is the crisp reprobation wrapped around a sweet hint of redemptive possibility—stick before carrot. When addressing the team, he is prone to mantra-like repetitions of his maxims, as in "Listen up. Listen up. I want you to go with your body. Go with your body. Go with your body. I want you to keep your foot in the paint. Your foot in the paint. Your foot in the paint. In the paint. And put the ball on the floor. The ball on the floor. On the floor."

This particular afternoon, Coach DeMello was especially hypnotic. The team was getting ready for its first out-of-town tournament of the year, the Charm City/Big Apple Challenge, in Baltimore, which would be played in the Baltimore Arena and televised on a cable channel. The Raiders would be facing Baltimore Southern High School, one of the best teams in the area. When I arrived at the Rice gym, the Raiders had been scrimmaging for an hour. Now, during a break, Coach DeMello was chanting strategy. "You guys are in a funk," he said. Someone dropped the ball, and it made an elastic *poing!* sound and rolled to the wall. "Gerald, hold the ball," DeMello went on. He clasped his hands behind his back. "Hold the ball. Okay. You guys are in a funk. You got to get your head in the game. Your head in the game. We're going up against a serious team in Baltimore. They do a hell of a job on help. A hell of a job. A. Hell. Of. A. Job. We need leaders on the floor. Leaders on the floor. All we want to do is contain. Contain. Contain. So you better hit the boards. Hit the boards. The boards."

Everyone nodded. The Rice Raiders are Felipe, Reggie Freeman, Yves Jean, Gerald Cox, Melvin McKey, Scientific Mapp, Gary Saunders, Gil Eagan, Kojo Lockhart, Rodney Jones, Robert Johnson, and Jamal Livingston. Melvin, the point guard, is usually called Ziggy. Jamal, the center, is known as Stretch. Gerald, who also plays center, is known as G-Money. Scientific, the reserve point guard, is known as Science. All of them are known, familiarly, as B, which is short for "bro," which is short for "brother." During practice, they are solemn and focused. During a game, they are ardent and intense, as if their lives depended on it. Before and after each game, they stand in a circle, make a stack of their right hands, and shout, "One, two, three, Rice! Four, five, six, family!"

Most of the Raiders live in the Bronx or upper Manhattan. Once, after a game, I rode in the van with an assistant coach as he dropped the team members off at their homes. A few of them lived in plain, solid-looking housing projects and some in walk-ups that, at least from the outside, looked bleak. No one lived in a very nice building. Some of the kids have families that come to all their games and monitor their schoolwork; some have families that have fallen apart. Six of the twelve live with only their mothers. Ziggy lives with his uncle, and the five others have a mother and a father at home. Each of them has at least one person somewhere in his life who arranges to send him to attend a disciplined and serious-minded parochial school. Sometimes it's not a parent; the Gauchos, for instance, send a number of basketball players to school. The coaches and teachers I met at Rice are white. Most of the teachers are Catholic brothers. The basketball team is all black, and none of its members is Catholic, although Gary told me once that he was thinking of converting, because "being Catholic seems like a pretty cool thing." There is currently a debate in the Catholic Church about financing schools that used to have Catholic students from the surrounding parish but are now largely black and non-Catholic, their purpose having shifted, along with neighborhood demographics, from one of service to the Church to one of contribution to the inner city. The debate may also have a flip side. I had heard that for a time one player's father, a devout Muslim, was unhappy that his son was being coached by a white man. But Coach DeMello resisted being drawn into an argument about something no one on the team ever paid attention to, and the crisis eventually passed. I didn't think of race very often while I spent time with the team. I thought more about winning and losing, and about how your life could be transformed from one to the other if you happened to be good at a game.

The seniors on the team are Yves Jean, Gerald Cox, and Reggie Freeman. Yves has signed a letter of intent to go to Pitt-Johnstown, which is a Division Two school; Gerald and Reggie are going to the University of South Carolina and the University of Texas, respectively, which are both in Division One. Yves grew up in Lake Placid. He was more fluent in ice fishing than in basketball when he moved to New York, but he is big and strong and has learned the game well enough, even as a second language. Usually, he looks pleasantly amazed when he makes a successful play. Gerald and Reggie are handsome, graceful players who would have been bigger stars this year if it weren't for Felipe. Gerald is dimpled and droll and flirtatious. Reggie has a long, smooth poker face and consummate cool. At times, he looks rigid with submerged disappointment. I remember Coach DeMello's telling me that when Reggie was a sophomore he was waiting patiently for Jerry McCullough, then the senior star, to leave for college, so that at last he would be the team's main man. Then Felipe came. Reggie and Felipe now have a polite rapport that fits together like latticework over their rivalry.

The team is a changeable entity. Some of the kids have bounced on and off the squad because of their grades. One of the players has had recurring legal problems. The girlfriend of another one had a baby last year, and because of that he missed so much school that for some time he

wasn't allowed to play on the team. When I first started hanging around with the Raiders, Rodney Jones wasn't on the roster, having had discipline problems and some academic troubles. Sometimes the boys get sick of one another. They practice together almost every day for several hours; they travel together to games and tournaments, which can sometimes last as long as two weeks; and they see one another all day in classrooms, at the Gaucho gym, and on the street. Usually, they have an easy camaraderie. During the other times, as soon as they are done with practice they quickly head their own ways.

"Are you guys listening to me? Are you listening?" DeMello was saying. He was now joined by Bobby Gonzalez, an assistant coach, who was nodding and murmuring "Uh-huh" after everything he said. Gonzalez handed DeMello a basketball. DeMello curled it to his left side, and then held his right hand up, one finger in the air, as if he were checking wind direction. "One more thing. One more thing. If there's one player you guys want to be looking up to right now, I'll tell you who it is."

"Uh-huh," Bobby Gonzalez said.

"That guy is Reggie Freeman. Reggie Freeman." No expression crossed Reggie's face. Felipe, who was standing on the other side of the circle, flexed his neck, rotated his shoulders, and then stood still, a peaceful expression on his face. "Reggie is the most unselfish player here. He is the most unselfish. I want you to remember that. He's grown a lot. That's who you should be looking at. Okay."

"Uh-huh."

DeMello bounced the ball hard, signaling the end of practice. The boys circled and counted: "One, two, three, Rice! Four, five, six, family!" They straggled out of the gym, talking in small groups.

"I never been to Baltimore."

"Let me ask you something. You think Larry Bird's a millionaire?"

"Larry Bird? I don't know. A millionaire. Magic's a millionaire."

"Magic's a millionaire, and he didn't have fifty-nine cents to buy himself a little hat and now he's going to die. The man's stupid."

"I don't know if Larry Bird's a millionaire. I do know he's never been to Harlem, and he's never done the Electric Slide."

FELIPE ON HIS DEVELOPMENT as a player:

"Back in my country, I was just a little guy. I tried to dunk, but I couldn't. I tried and I tried. Then, one day, I dunked. Oh, my goodness. Three months later, I was dunking everything, every way—with two hands, backwards, backwards with two hands. I can do a three-sixty dunk. It's easy. You know, you jump up backwards with the ball and then spin around while you're in the air—and *pow!* I'm working all the time on my game. If Coach DeMello says he wants me to work on my ball handling, then I just work at it, work at it, work at it, until it's right. In basketball, you always are working, even on the things you already know.

"When I come to this country, I was real quiet, because I didn't speak any English, so all I did was dunk. On the court, playing, I had to learn the words for the plays, but you don't have to talk, so I was okay. My coach used his hands to tell me what to do, and then I learned the English words for it. There aren't too many Spanish kids at school. I know a lot of kids, though. I meet kids from all over the country at tournaments and at summer camps. If you do something good, then you start meeting people, even if you don't want to. Sometimes it's bouncing in my head that people are talking about me, saying good things, and that some people are talking about me and saying bad things, saying, like, 'Oh, he thinks he's all that,' but that's life. That's life. I don't like when it's bouncing in my head, but I just do what I'm supposed to do. I'm quick. I broke the record for the fifty-yard dash when I was in junior high school—I did it in five point two seconds, when the record was five point five seconds. I also got the long-jump record. It feels natural when I do these things. In basketball, I like to handle the ball and make the decisions. I can play the big people, because of my quickness. But I got to concentrate or the ball will go away from me. At

basketball camp, I'm always the craziest guy—people always are walking around saying, 'Hey, who's that Dominican clown?' But on the court I don't do any fooling around. I got to show what I got.

"In life, I don't worry about myself. My brother will run defense for me. I got my family. Some kids here, I see them do drugs, messing around, wasting everything, and I see the druggies out on the street, and I just, I don't know, I don't understand it. That's not for me. I got a close family, and I got to think about my family, and if I can do something that will be good for my whole family, then I got to do it. I think about my country a lot—I want to go there so bad. In Santiago, everyone knows about me and wants to see me play now. If I'm successful, the way everyone talks about that, I'd like a big house there in Santiago, where I could go for a month or two each year and just relax."

AFTER PRACTICE, Felipe and I walked down 125th Street in a cold rain. First, he bought new headphones for his tape player from a Ghanaian street peddler, and then we stopped at Kentucky Fried Chicken to eat a predinner dinner before heading home. He was dressed in his school clothes—a multicolored striped shirt, a purple-and-blue flowered tie, and pleated, topstitched baggy black cotton pants—and had on a Negro League baseball cap, which he was wearing sideways and at a jaunty angle. In his book bag were some new black Reebok pump basketball shoes; everyone on the team had been given a pair for the Baltimore tournament. Felipe was in a relaxed mood. He has traveled to and played in big tournaments so often that he now takes them in stride. He has become something of a tournament connoisseur. One of his favorite places in the world is southern France, where he played last spring with the Gauchos. He liked the weather and the countryside and the fact that by the end of the tour French villagers were crowding into the gyms and chanting his name. This particular evening, he was also feeling pleased that he had finished most of the homework he needed to do before leaving for Baltimore, which consisted of writing an essay for American history on *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Fifteenth Amendment, preparing an annotated periodic table of the elements, and writing two poems for his Spanish class.

One of his poems was called "*Los Dientes de Mi Abuela*," which translates as "The Teeth of My Grandmother." Sitting in Kentucky Fried Chicken, he read it to me: "*Conservando la naturaleza se ve en aquella mesa los dientes de mi abuela, que los tenía guardados para Navidad.*" He looked up from his notebook and gestured with a chicken wing. "This is about an old grandmother who is saving her special teeth for Christmas. In my country, it's funny, old people will go around without their teeth. So in the poem the grandmother is saving the teeth for Christmas, when she'll be eating a big dinner. The teeth are brilliant and shiny. Then she gets impatient and uses them to eat a turkey at Thanksgiving—'*GRRRT . . . suena la mordida de la abuela al pavo.*'" The other poem Felipe had written was about a man about to enter prison or some other gloomy passage in his life. It is called "*La Primera y Última Vez . . .*" As he began reading it, an argument broke out in front of the restaurant between a middle-aged woman in a cream-colored suit and two little boys who were there on their own. First, the boys were just sassy, and then they began yelling that the woman was a crack addict. She balled up a napkin and threw it at them, shouting, "Why don't you respect your elders? What are you doing out at night all alone? Why don't you get your asses home and watch television or read a fucking book?" Felipe kept reciting his poem, raising his voice over the commotion. When he finished, he said, "It's a sadder poem than the one about the grandmother. I like writing poems. In school, I like to write if it's in Spanish, and I like to draw, and I like math. I'm good at math. I like numbers. How do I write the poems? I don't know how. They just come to me."

Done with dinner, we went back out onto 125th Street and caught a cab up to Felipe's apartment. The apartment was in a brick walk-up, on a block with half a playground, a bodega, some unclaimed auto parts, and the depopulated stillness of urban decay. Walking up the four flights to the apartment, we passed an unchaperoned German shepherd napping in the vestibule, a stack of discarded Chinese menus, and someone's garbage, which had toppled over in a doorway. Felipe took the stairs three at a time. He used to dribble up and down the staircase until the neighbors complained that it was driving them crazy. For that reason and many others, the Lopezes were looking forward to moving as soon as they possibly could. Ironically, Felipe has been discouraged from playing in Puerto Rico this summer, on the ground that the basketball league there has a reputation for attracting prostitutes and drug use, when the fact is that spending the summer in Puerto Rico would help him get out of a neighborhood that attracts prostitutes and drug use.

One reason I decided to go home with Felipe was that I thought it might reveal something I hadn't yet seen in him—impatience or embarrassment at living a very humble life when he has been assured that such a rich and celebrated one is virtually in his grasp. That turned out to be not at all the case. In fact, Felipe loves to have people come over to his apartment. That night, he had invited Coach DeMello and his tutor, Maura Beattie, to drop by. When we arrived, they were already there. So were Mrs. Lopez; Felipe's brother Anderson, who moved to this country last year; Anderson's girlfriend, Nancy; Anthony; and Felipe's father. Felipe's sister, Sayonara, was expected as soon as she was through with a meeting at church. The Lopezes are an exceptionally good-looking and unusually large-scale family. Felipe's father, a construction laborer, is broad-chested, dignified, and well over six feet tall. His mother, Carmen, who works in the Garment District, is leggy and vigorous. She competed in track and volleyball as a girl in the Dominican Republic. That night, she was wearing a long flowered dress and black Reeboks. In the Dominican Republic, the Lopezes had a middle-class life. In this country, that life did not change so much as compress. All its hallmarks—Luis's exacting discipline, Carmen's piety, the children's sense of honor and obligation—came over intact, and then intensified in contrast to the disorder of the neighborhood they found themselves in.

The Lopez apartment was a warren of tiny dark rooms. One wall in the living room was covered with plaques Felipe had won—among them the *Parade* All-American High School Boys Award, the Five-Star Basketball Camp Most Promising Player, and the Ben Wilson Memorial Award for Most Valuable Player at ABCD Basketball Camp—and one corner of the room was filled by an old broken television set with what looked like a hundred basketball trophies on top. There was also a new television set, a videocassette recorder, a shelving unit, a huge sofa, a huge easy chair, a huge coffee table, some pretty folk-craft decorations from the Dominican Republic, some occasional tables, big billowy curtains, several floor lamps, and a life-size freestanding cardboard cutout of Michael Jordan. It was an exuberant-looking place. It was also possibly the most crowded place I'd ever been in. The television was tuned to a Spanish soap opera when we walked in, and Maura Beattie and Coach DeMello were sitting beside it, ignoring the show and eating pizza. The Michael Jordan cutout was propped up behind DeMello, blocking the back door. Anderson and Nancy were squeezed together on the couch, looking at one of Felipe's scrapbooks, and Anthony was pacing around the room and talking to his father, who was reclined in the easy chair. Felipe said hello to his mother and they chatted for a minute in Spanish, and then she led him to a seat at the kitchen table and set a stockpot in front of him that was filled with chicken

stew. There seemed to be a lot of people coming and going, and the conversation perked along:

DeMELLO: I'll never forget when Anthony brought Felipe to Rice. He couldn't speak a word of English. I thought, How on earth is this kid going to take the entrance exams? Maura, do you remember that?

Ms. BEATTIE: I'm a math teacher. I'm not an English tutor. But I figured this would be something interesting to do. I didn't want the Lopezes to realize I wasn't really a tutor.

ANTHONY (*walking through the kitchen*): Felipe, are you ready for tomorrow? You got your books with you? You planning to play?

NANCY (*translating for Carmen Lopez*): She says Felipe would rather play than eat. Otherwise, he don't give her no torment.

DeMELLO: You should see the tape of the commercial Felipe and Robert Johnson did for Nintendo. They had a lot of fun, a lot of fun. Someone gave them bad advice, though, and it almost cost Felipe his eligibility. He turned down the money, and the commercial has to stop playing when he gets into college.

Ms. BEATTIE: You want more pizza? Should we get more pizza? Felipe, would you eat more? He doesn't eat. I don't think he eats.

NANCY: Would you look at this, all these trophies! Felipe, you got all these trophies?

ANDERSON (*to Nancy*): One of those is mine. Yeah, really. Nancy, look in the middle of the table and you'll find mine.

ANTHONY: Everything everybody tells you is so beautiful—you know, be on TV, score thirty points, be the MVP, have the fame, all right—but you got to pay attention. There are a lot of rules. The NCAA rule is that no coaches can talk to him while he's a junior. They're willing, they're dying to talk to him, but that's not going to happen. When he's ready, we'll meet and talk and see. I had these dreams to be a great player, and I had my ankle broken, so it was all over for me. Felipe is my chance to see it happen for someone in my family, but it's going to happen the right way.

FELIPE (*coming in from the kitchen with Sayonara, just back from church*): Mommy, hey, Mommy, didn't I grow all these inches over here? One day, remember, I went to my closet and found these little pants and I said, "Mommy, whose pants are these?" They were only this big—just little short pants—and she said, "Felipe, those are your pants!" I couldn't believe it! I couldn't believe I ever wore those pants! I just looked at them and thought, Oh, my goodness.

DeMELLO: Hey, Felipe, are you ready for tomorrow? Because anyone who isn't ready with their homework done, Brother is going to hear about it, and we're not going to be going to any other tournaments. Are you ready?

FELIPE: DeMello, I got one thing I got to do tomorrow. I got to type my essay.

SAYONARA: Felipe, I think you're better at basketball than at typing.

NANCY (*translating for Carmen Lopez*): She says he has to do the essay. She says they're so proud of him, and with the help of God he'll go to the top, he'll be a great dunker. That's what she imagines for him in five years. For now, though, they don't soup him up. He has to do right. They still walk to Felipe—they're not running.

WE DROVE TO BALTIMORE the next night in a car rented by the tournament sponsors and a van used by the school. The tournament sponsors were also providing rooms for the whole team in a posh hotel downtown. The following day, after breakfast, the Raiders went for a pregame practice. The Baltimore Arena is big and windy, and it had a depressing effect on the team. They ran some bumbling fast-break drills and then had shooting practice for forty-five minutes, banging the balls against the rim. The clanking sound floated up and away into the empty stands. Coach DeMello called them together toward the end of practice. "I don't

know where you guys are," he said. "I don't know where you guys are. You got to get your heads here by tonight. By. Tonight. This team, this team is going to give us something. They've got No. 53, he's a beef, he's six-five. Six. Five. And there's a fast point guard. He looks really young, he's probably a sophomore, but he does a hell of a job on help. They don't gamble. They get a lot of shots off. They help and recover." Pause. "Help and recover. Help and recover. And, Felipe, I saw you start to drop your head because you missed some shots. I don't want to see that. I want to see you lift your head and go on. All right, let's head out. I want everybody to relax and be dressed and in my room at 6:00 P.M., understand? Understand? Okay. Okay."

The arena is near Inner Harbor, a swank shopping development in downtown Baltimore, so everybody walked over there to get some pizza and kill time. Twelve tall black boys, wearing bright yellow-and-green warm-ups, the pants hanging low and almost sliding off their hips, made for a sight that was probably not usual at Inner Harbor. Shoppers were executing pick-and-rolls to avoid them. In the mall, there were dozens of stores open, but the boys seemed reluctant to go into them. We ended up in a sporting goods shop that specialized in clothes and accessories with college and professional team logos. Felipe disappeared down one of the rows. Kojo posted up in front of a rack of jackets, took two down, looked at the price tags, and then put them back. Reggie and Gerald found hats featuring their future colleges. "Yo, I like this one," Gerald said. "It's fly, but what I really want is a fitted Carolina hat. They only have the unfitted kind."

Reggie glanced at him and then said, "Why don't you wait till you get to Carolina, man? They going to have everything you want, man, just wait."

"I don't want to wait." Gerald put on an unfitted hat—the kind with an adjustable strap across the back—and flipped the brim back. Gary Saunders came over and looked at him. Gary is a sophomore. An air of peace or woe seems to form a bumper around him. Some people think he will eventually be as good as Felipe, or even better. He pulled Gerald's brim and then rocked back on his heels and said, sadly, "I wish I had a hat head. I can't wear a hat. I look dumb in a hat." Felipe walked by, wearing three hats, with each brim pointing in a different direction. He was smiling like a madman. He admired himself in the mirror and then took the hats off. "I've had enough," he said to no one in particular. "Now I'm going to my room."

SOME THINGS at the tournament did not bode well. For instance, the program listed the team as "Rice, Bronx, N.Y." instead of placing the school in Manhattan. Also, Jamal Livingston had decided to shave his head during the afternoon, and the razor broke after he had finished only one hemisphere. The resulting raggedy hairdo made him look like a crazy person. He was so unhappy about it that he told Coach DeMello he wouldn't play, but Science finally persuaded him, saying, "Stretch, you look cool, man. You're down with the heavy-metal crowd now." The Raiders got their first look at the Southern players as they warmed up. They were big kids, and they looked meaty, heavy-footed, and mean. Damon Cason, the point guard DeMello had warned the Raiders about, had powerful shoulders and a taut body and a merciless look on his face. Beside him, Felipe looked wispy and hipless. Warming up, he was silent and unsmiling. The fans were loud and found much to amuse them. When Jamal stepped onto the

court, they began chanting "~~Haircut~~ ~~Haircut~~, ~~Haircut~~," and then switched to a chant of "Rice-A-Roni!" and then back to "Haircut!" every time Jamal took a shot.

The game begins, and in the opening moments I focus only on Felipe. Rice wins the tap, but Southern scores nine quick points and looks ready to score more. Three Southern players are guarding Felipe. They struggle

after him on the fast breaks, but he slips by and, still skimming along, makes a driving layup from the right. Then a fast-break layup, off a snappy pass from Ziggy. Then, thirty-two seconds later, a driving layup from the left side. The guards are looking flustered and clumsy. Felipe gets a rebound, passes to Reggie, gets the ball back, and then suddenly he drifts upward, over the court, over the other boys, toward the basket, legs scissored, wrists cocked, head tilted, and in that instant he looks totally serene. Right before he dunks the ball, I have the sensation that the arena is silent, but, of course, it isn't; it's just that as soon as he slams the ball down there is a crack of applause and laughter, which makes the instant preceding it seem, by contrast, like a vacuum of sound, a little quiet hole in space.

The final score is Rice 64, Southern 42. Leaving the floor, Felipe is greeted by some of the white men, who have come down to Baltimore to watch his game. One of them comments on how well he played and wants to know what he did all afternoon to prepare. Felipe is mopping his face with a towel. He folds it up and then says, "Oh, my goodness, I didn't do much of anything. I sat in my room and watched *Popeye* on television and listened to merengue music. I just felt good today."

THE LAST TIME I spent with the team was the night before they were to leave on a trip to two tournaments—the Iolani Classic, in Honolulu, and the Holiday Prep Classic, in Las Vegas. The flight to Hawaii was so early that Coach DeMello decided to have the boys sleep at the school. After practice, they spent a few hours doing homework and then ordered in pizzas. Reggie had brought a big radio from home and set it up under a crucifix on the second floor, tuned to a station playing corny soul ballads. Coach DeMello had set up a video player and lent the team his NBA highlight tapes. "You guys going to keep it together up here?" he said. "Let's keep it together up here."

One of them yelled out, "Hey, Coach, I got to ask you something. Are there any girls in Hawaii our age?"

Someone told Reggie to turn off the radio, because the music was awful.

Reggie said, "Bro, you bugging."

"It's stupid, man. Find something better."

"Get your own radio, bro. Then you can be the DJ."

"Reggie Freeman's got a problem."

"Hey, Gary, where'd you get that shirt?"

"Macy's."

"Macy's! What, you rich or something?"

"Put on the tape. I want to see Bird and Magic play."

"Bird's a white guy."

Talking Points

1. Over the course of this profile, does your impression of Felipe change? Why do you think Orlean includes the image of Felipe leaving the group to ride the elevator near the end of the profile?
2. How is Felipe typical of all high-school basketball stars? How is he different?
3. Does the writer, Susan Orlean, think Felipe will be the "one in a million" who makes it to the NBA?
4. What assumptions does Orlean admit to having before she gets to know Felipe well?
5. What does the scene in Kentucky Fried Chicken, with Felipe reciting his poetry, imply about Felipe?
6. How important is setting in this profile?
7. What kind of research has Orlean included in her profile?

Writing in the Works: Interview with Susan Orlean

SUSAN ORLEAN has been described as one of America's most entertaining and original literary journalists. A staff writer at The New Yorker since 1992, Orlean has also contributed to Outside, Rolling Stone, Vogue and Esquire. She is the author of three books: *Saturday Night*, *The Orchid Thief* and most recently, *The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup*, a collection of her most celebrated profiles. Orlean delivered the School of Journalism and Communication's 2001 Johnston Lecture, "Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary: Writing about Everyday Life" and conducted a three-day workshop entitled "Writing About... American Life," part of the UO's Literary Nonfiction program.

Q: What is it about so-called ordinary people that attracts you as a writer?

A: Writing about "ordinary" people is about following my own curiosity. After doing celebrity journalism, I realized I was more interested in the things I walked past every day, the stuff people usually miss. I'm primarily interested in the tiny master -- a person with a tiny domain over which they are the master. I wrote a piece about a New York City cabdriver who is also the king of the Ashanti tribe in America. After that experience, I realized -- you never know. Any other cab driver I meet, any ordinary person, could be a king. It made me step lightly.

Q: What are some of the challenges of writing about people who aren't well known?

A: One obstacle you face when writing about ordinary life is that you can't possibly know what the story is in advance of writing it. Finding what the story is -- reporting the story -- is the journey you take as the writer. And that means, of course, that I can't go into the process already knowing what it is I'm going to write -- which often makes it hard to pitch the idea to an editor! Beyond that, it's never easy to convince an editor to run a story about "nothing."

Another challenge is that it simply isn't easy to write about people who aren't used to being written about. The subjects themselves offer some resistance, at first. "Why would you want to talk to me?" is a pretty standard reaction. I have to convince them that it is interesting for me to talk to them, and to see them doing just what they would normally do.

Q: Obviously, though, people love reading your profiles. Are there barriers you need to get your readers past?

A: Yes. Readers are initially resistant to a story about an "ordinary" person. Persuading someone to read a piece about a 10-year-old boy who's not a "star" is quite a challenge. All you can bring to it is your passion. There's got to be something you're

what you're writing. There's nothing that's obviously sexy about these stories. So, among other things, you need to write a good lead.

Q: Your leads are often called the best in the business. What can you tell us about them?

A: Good leads are crucial, especially when you're writing unconventional ordinary-life stories. They're the point at which you gain -- or lose -- the reader's attention. I like a lead that makes you stop, that catches or captures you for a second. Dissonant leads, jangly leads, slightly troubling leads all make you want to read a little bit more. They leave you puzzled in a good way.

Q: What would you advise beginning writers on developing leads?

A: Think of the opening of a piece as a bit of acting. You don't have to maintain the lead's tone throughout the entire story. It's a chance to be a little daring and get the reader engaged. I sometimes like having a first section that's maybe a bit exaggerated. Another thing to remember is that you don't have to make the lead do all the work of telling what the story is about. It's not a suitcase jam-packed with the entire piece. An overloaded lead is quite off-putting. A lead does not have to be a topic sentence.

Q: You've described the stages of putting together a story as reporting, thinking, and writing. How do you approach the reporting stage?

A: I believe in being unprepared in certain ways. You're going into another world; doing extensive background research first can close you off to observing it. It's good to be uncomfortable, to use your instincts and intelligence and curiosity to look at this strange new world you're exploring. You have to use your wits. Anything factual you can check on later.

Over-researching also tips the psychological balance between you and your subject: I'm the reporter, I have knowledge and power. You're only the ordinary person. That intimidates the people you're observing and writing about.

In a way, the ignorance or freshness you bring to a new subject is the greatest asset a writer can have. The writer is there to learn, after all, and it's best to learn from the people you're writing about, in their words. And afterward, if you need to go back or go to the library for factual information, that's not hard.

Q: What's critical in getting the people you're writing about to open up to you?

A: You have to develop emotional strategies about how to get into people's lives. What works for me might not work for everybody. What is critical, though, is the ability to cultivate in yourself a genuine empathy, to be as open as you possibly can.

The more authentic ingenuousness you can bring to a reporting situation the better. Think of yourself as a privileged visitor.

Q: You've talked about your preference for "hanging out" with your subjects rather than interviewing them. Why is that?

A: I like having as much unstructured time with the people I'm writing about as possible. It's important for me to be with people while they're doing something, ideally, while they're doing just what they would normally be doing if I weren't there. That's much more valuable than having them just sitting there talking at me. So I rarely ask questions in the form of an interview.

Q: What sort of stylistic guidelines do you keep in mind when writing?

A: I'm a great believer in simple, very strong, language. There are two things that are critical to avoid. The first is what The New Yorker calls "elegant variation," fancying up your writing unnecessarily. The other is indirection. Be clear about time and place: When and where is the story unfolding? What are you talking about?

You also shouldn't raise questions without answering them or create images or metaphors that don't ultimately deliver what they promise. It's sometimes OK to bring something in that doesn't explicitly advance the plot but merely adds atmosphere. That's a purposeful aside. You can take the reader down a little cul-de-sac, but then you have to bring him back to the main road.

Something else to keep in mind: facts are poetry. People like scenes and anecdotes, and they'll happily read them if they're short enough, but they also need facts and exposition to break up the scenes. You have to deliver the factual information in an elegant, interesting way, of course.

But even with all these "guidelines," much of the process is magical. So the question is, how do you encourage in yourself those more creative, lyrical, magical moments of your writing?

Writer's Notebook

Use these exercises to jumpstart your thinking for your profile.

1. Choose a person. Describe the subject's clothing in three sentences that also give your reader a strong impression of character. Here's an example:

He's clad in wrinkled khakis and a long-sleeved shirt adorned with a fine patina of fuzz, and his steel wool-colored hair hasn't recently encountered a comb. If Fay looks like hell, he feels even worse. While on the trip, he contracted filaria, a blood-borne infestation of tiny, threadlike worms that, if left untreated, can black the flow of lymph inside a victim's body and cause the extremities to swell to a grotesque size. . . Fay grimaces and peers through Coke-bottle glasses—he's had trouble with his eyesight since childhood—into a forest of Brooks Brothers suits and elegant dresses. ("Grand March of an American Misfit" by Patrick J. Kiger, the *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 2002)

2. Listen in on a conversation—in a café, in a bookstore, on public transportation. Take notes and then write up a page of your overheard conversation. Use the spoken and unspoken communication here: include all gestures, facial expressions, pauses, and inflections (when voices rise or fall, become whispers, etc.)
3. Look through the yellow pages of the phone book for interesting occupations. Make a list of businesses you would want to know more about.
4. Write a brief portrait introducing your best friend,; focus on a single aspect of his or her life, or a single character trait.
5. Watch a profile documentary film. Make notes of how many quotations from the subject you hear. What other sources are quoted, and what they have to say? How many anecdotes do you hear? How does the filmmaker move the story from one time period to another?
6. Attend a sporting event and observe one player—during play, on the bench, and after the game. Record all gestures, signs of emotion, and actions. Afterwards, write a descriptive lead for a profile on the player.
7. Observe someone with a technical skill: a bread baker, an interpreter for the deaf, a dentist, a plumber. Write a one-paragraph explanation, and description of a process you observed, making it easy to understand.
8. This exercise is slightly adapted from one suggested by John Rains on the Small Town Press Web site:

Find a profile you like and get yourself a handful of highlighters. Assign colors to different elements. Go through and highlight such things as anecdotes, quotations

from the subject, quotations about the subject, metaphors, humor, physical description, sensory details, examples, narrative, exposition. See what color pattern you get. Rains says you'll probably find a rich mosaic, though some profiles may rely more heavily on narrative, or humor, others more on exposition.

9. Modeling: The following description is from a profile of Lieutenant Colonel Robert O. Sinclair, commander of the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit of Camp Pendleton, California. Look carefully at the way the writer, Mike Sager, sets the scene in the present tense, using that technique to pull the reader into the scene. Note his repetitive sentence structure, verb choice, sensory detail and the way he emphasizes the details of the description with explanation.

His pale-blue eyes are bloodshot from lack of sleep. His face is camouflaged with stripes and splotches of greasepaint—green, brown, and black to match his woodland-style utilities, fifty-six dollars a set, worn in the field without skivvies underneath, a personal wardrobe preference known as going commando. Atop his Kevlar helmet rides a pair of goggles sheathed in an old sock. Around his neck hangs a heavy pair of rubberized binoculars. From his left hip dangles an olive-drab pouch. With every step, the pouch swings and hits his thigh, adding another faint, percussive thunk to the quiet symphony of his gear, the total weight of which is not taught and seldom discussed. Inside the pouch is a gas mask for NBC attacks—nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons. Following an attack, when field gauges show the air to be safe once again for breathing, regulations call for the senior Marine to choose one man to remove his mask and hood. After ten minutes, if the man shows no ill effects, the rest of the Marines can begin removing theirs. (“The Marine” by Mike Sager, *Esquire*, Dec. 2001, vol. 136, Issue 6)

Choose someone to describe. Write a one-paragraph description, imitating Sager's style. Use similar sentence structures, details, and combination of description with explanation.

Revision: one more look

These questions and suggestions are designed to help you rethink your profile between your current and final drafts. If you are working with a writing partner or in a peer-editing group, the questions can serve as prompts for discussion as you workshop the reviews. These questions are also useful to ask yourself as you work on your final revision.

1. Identify the nutgraf. Does the nut come too early or late in the profile? Judge this by asking whether the lead has set up the nut sufficiently—does the focus seem like a natural extension of the opening? Does it seem artificially tacked on?
2. What kind of lead does the profile have? Can you start the profile with a more interesting anecdote, narrative scene, or generalization—one that might be found later in the story?
3. Is the nutgraf a good overview of the story? Does it deliver everything it promises?
4. Point out places where you refer back to the idea in the nut, reinforcing and developing the thesis as the profile progresses. Locate any missed opportunities to remind the reader of the focus of the profile.
5. Look at the way you have organized your profile, making sure you don't have a "resume in paragraphs."
6. Do the sections have good transitions? Do the narrative sections tie in with the expository?
7. Does the story show and tell? Do you have enough anecdotes to illustrate the generalizations you make in paragraphs?
8. Are your points about the character clear? Do you establish an impression of your subject through the anecdotes you include? Could you insert more anecdotes or more character-in-action scenes to reveal character?
9. Is the profile well researched? Could you use another source? Do you have good quotations from reliable sources? Can you get the same information from a more objective source?
10. Does the profile work too hard at praising the subject? If the subject is worthy of praise, do you have enough illustrations, quotations, and evidence to show your reader this is the case?
11. Is there any conflicting information, anything that undermines your interpretation?
12. Does the profile end with a memorable image?

Markets

The most obvious market for your profile is a daily newspaper. Most profiles appear in the feature sections of the newspaper. Large metropolitan papers have special sections for specific geographical areas. These special sections of the big papers are always on the lookout for newsworthy citizens, especially if they have some connection to a news event or some recent issue. Your college or university newspaper would also be a good place to publish a profile about a student—current or former—professor, administrator, or employee.

Magazines also publish many profiles. One often overlooked market for this type of writing is the alumni magazines of colleges and universities. If your subject

has a tie to a school, find out whether the school has an alumni magazine (most do), and whether they take writing from freelancers—people not on the writing staff.

Because so many businesses, clubs, churches, and civic groups also have national magazines and even newsletters that include interesting profiles of members, or people involved in activities related to the group, you have an excellent chance at publishing almost any profile. *Writer's Market*, available in bookstores and libraries, lists publications by areas of interest. You can get information on what type of articles the publication buys, the address for sending a manuscript or query letter, and how long it will take to get a response.

Many publications have Web sites that list the publication guidelines and give information on submitting articles.

Choosing a target publication should involve some strategy. You should investigate whether the publication has recently published similar profiles, and if the tone, style, and topic of your profile fits in with the profiles previously published.

If you are going to try to publish any of your writing, this genre is the best choice. Many students have published profiles written in classes, blending in with all the other professional writing in local papers, newsletters, and specialty magazines, which are always hunting for interesting, well-researched personality profiles.

You can mail the finished profile to a publication, with a brief cover letter, similar to the query letter, described below. Whenever submitting a manuscript to a publication, include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (you'll see this abbreviated to SASE in *Writer's Market*). The postage on the envelope should cover the postage for returning your manuscript in case it isn't suitable for the publication.

The Query Letter

Another option for profile writers, instead of submitting a completed article, is to submit a query letter, giving a brief summary of your article to an editor at your target publication, even before you have written the profile. Selling a story idea before you have completed the article is practical and useful to you as a writer (you know you won't be wasting your time on an idea no one will want, for one thing, and for another, you will have an editor at a magazine with whom to talk through ideas or questions.)

Queries can also be made in the form of emails. Some publications limit online queries to a few hundred words. Editors might reply with questions about your subject or ideas about the profile, so you would want to be sure to include good contact information—email, street address, telephone number.

A query letter follows standard business-letter format, available as a template on most word-processing programs. Some important parts of a formal letter are:

- your return address and the date in the upper right-hand corner
- the name of the person to whom you are addressing your letter (you can get the editor's name from *Writer's Market*, from inside the magazine, or by phoning the magazine. Remember to spell the name correctly.
- name and address of the magazine
- a formal salutation followed by a colon
- use single spacing within elements: the return address, individual paragraphs

- use double spacing between elements: Between the paragraphs, after the salutation
- a formal close, including your signature and typed name

Keep in mind this is a formal business letter, presenting your ideas in as organized and brief a fashion as possible. The query letter should not go over one page. Some publications give a 100-word limit for queries, especially email query letters. Whatever your limitations, your query should have about three paragraphs.

Your first paragraph gives editors a sense of your writing style as well as a summary of your idea for the profile. Busy editors will pay attention to a query that is well written, concise, and interesting, and they will be quick to dismiss a letter that doesn't get to the point quickly. You should include some fascinating context or interesting details—establishing what is newsworthy or noteworthy about your subject. In this paragraph, you are answering the editor's question: how will this profile be interesting to my readers? The questions under "Choosing a good profile subject" will help you focus your story proposal. Attaching your profile to an anniversary of some milestone event is one way to make your profile newsworthy. You should also include a brief description of the project you have in mind: story type (profile) and approximate length in number of words.

If you need to, you can go into a second paragraph of detail on your subject. This is a chance to be concise yet revealing. You don't ever want to be confusing or vague in your query letter.

Include your qualifications to write this article: here you can talk about your access to the subject: "I was coached by Melinda Berishford for ten years, and she has agreed to let me observe her coaching at the next NCAA meet." Or give the editor a sense of your seriousness by mentioning the research you have already started: "I have contacted Nathan Halinger and he has agreed to meet with me this week for an interview." You could list any other sources who might contribute authority to the story, such as experts, competitors, or former teachers. If you have published in other places—the school newspaper, for example, you might include some clippings.

Here is an example of a query put together by Midge Raymond, author of the profile, referred to several times in this chapter; about the Chinese activist, Shen Tong.

640 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, MA 02215
April 1999

Michael B. Shavelson
Editor
Bostonia Magazine
10 Lenox Street
Brookline, MA 02446

Dear Mr. Shavelson:

Ten years ago this spring, thousands of Chinese students began to gather in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, asking their government for political reform and democracy. Two months later, their peaceful demonstrations were crushed by the military. As the tenth anniversary of the 1989 student movement nears, new questions arise: Where are China's former student leaders now? How has the social and political climate changed since the spring of 1989? I propose an article for *Bostonia* that will address these issues through a profile of Shen Tong, a major leader of the 1989 movement.

Shen Tong, now a graduate student at Boston University, is on a list of 49 people banned from ever returning to China. This article will look at Shen Tong's childhood during China's Cultural Revolution, his involvement in student activism, and his days in Tiananmen Square. The article will also highlight Shen Tong's work for democracy in China through his foundation, the Democracy for China fund (DCF), his thoughts on and hopes for democratic future in China, and coverage of the DCF-sponsored memorial event in June—Reflecting on Tiananmen: Ten Years Later—which will bring the major student leaders together for the first time since they fled Tiananmen Square.

Bostonia magazine has a long tradition of profiling exceptional faculty, alumni, and students at Boston University. Recent issues, for example, have featured three former 1960s "radicals" at BU, tracing their lives from their politically active college days to the present, and award-winning College of Engineering professor Leo Felsen, a Holocaust survivor. Having lived in Asia for more than a year, and having traveled through China in 1992, just three years after the Tiananmen Square incident, I bring to the story a high level of interest in and understanding of the Chinese culture. I have already contacted Shen Tong, who will gladly give an interview. I also hope to speak with Xu Jin, a BU graduate student who is working to free her father, Xu Wenli, a longtime political prisoner in China, as well as Boston University history professor Merle Goldman, an expert on Chinese dissent. Further details about my writing background, as well as several published clips, are enclosed.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Midge Raymond

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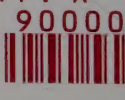
Pg. 172, Susan Orlean interview – Taken from <http://Inf.uoregon.edu/notable/orlean.html>



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